

Daniel Birnbaum & Anders Olsson

As a Weasel Sucks Eggs
An Essay on Melancholy
and Cannibalism



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He said to me, "Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with
this scroll which I am giving you."

Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.

Ezekiel 3:3

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I. Stavrogin's Bite

Ivan Ossipovitch approached the subject in a roundabout way, almost in a whisper, but kept getting a little muddled. Nikolay looked anything but cordial, not at all as a relation should. He was pale and sat looking down, continually moving his eyebrows as though trying to control acute pain.

/.../

Nikolay listened with vexation and impatience. All at once there was a gleam of something sly and mocking in his eyes.

"I'll tell you what drives me to it," he said sullenly, and looking around him he bent down to Ivan Ossipovitch's ear. The refined Alyosha Telyatnikov moved three steps farther away towards the window, and the colonel coughed over the *Golos*. Poor Ivan Ossipovitch hurriedly and trustfully inclined his ear; he was exceedingly curious. And then something utterly incredible, though on the other hand all too unmistakable, took place. The old man suddenly felt that, instead of telling him some interesting secret, Nikolay had seized the upper part of his ear between his teeth and was nipping it rather hard. He shuddered, and breath failed him.

"Nicolas, this is beyond a joke!" he moaned mechanically in a voice not his own.

This is the third scene, and as well the third public scandal, in which the main character in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, the young prince Stavrogin, is

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, New York 2004, p. 51. Transl. Constance Garnett. [Translation modified slightly. -Translator]

presented to the reader. We have heard about his peculiar upbringing, alone with his mother, with a tutor who quite simply was entirely lacking in character. We have heard about the outbreaks of brutal mania during his military service, which led to his having killed one man and rendered another invalid in a duel. But – as is so often the case in Dostoevsky – it is the dramatic scene that reveals who a human being really is. We have heard much about him, and we will continue to hear much about him – this demonic beast – who is as icily distant as he is corporeally tangible. But he is never entirely real until we arrive at the scenes in which he himself makes an appearance. People have been trying to understand his incomprehensible outbursts: they bring in three doctors, a diagnosis is reached. His outrageous behavior is determined to be the expression of a mental disorder, of delirium, of a manic dizziness. He is exculpated, the people around him breathe a sigh of relief.

Not the reader. The reader grasps that this is just the beginning, a disturbing and incisive prologue to a horrible tale of terror.

Who is this Stavrogin, who is described as proud, elegant, silent and somber, strong as an ox, pale, and surprisingly thoughtful? His tutor, the conceited freethinker Stepan Trofimovich, has apparently awoken an “eternal, holy longing” in his initiate even at the tender age of sixteen, a longing for something that, once tasted, “almost never is traded for a more common satisfaction.”² Stavrogin is a Lucifer, a fallen angel, who apparently enjoys his state of degeneration and his manic dissipations, but who dreams of a different, absolute food. He is a timid, ice-cold melancholiac who suddenly and capriciously reveals his innermost secret: he is a highly dangerous cannibal, ready to sink his teeth into the first sacrificial victim that comes along.



This scene from *The Possessed* provides a clue to the alarming connection between the two extremes that are the poles of this essay: melancholy* and eating, gloominess and the search for another type of nourishment beyond the ordinary. This is a dynamic that permeates our Western cultural heritage,

² Ibid. p. 47.

* See “Note on the Translation” for the use of *melancholy*, *melancholic*, and related terms.

but which likely requires a special optics to be detected: eating, and certainly its cannibalistic variant, is surrounded by so many taboos, habits, and rules that we do not see that which is most obvious. Primitive, violent eating has undergone a symbolic transformation, which has pushed aside its pre-history.

As is so often the case, it is the poets, and to a certain extent the philosophers, who lead us deeper into the labyrinth of hunger. They are distanced from the requirements to which the community-engendering meal is connected, either because they are outside the community, or because they have an appetite or hunger that consistently exceeds the boundaries of culture's sacrosanct regulatory scheme. As a matter of custom, they have adopted a melancholic position, unable to forget the Golden Age of Saturn, an era associated with images of an infinitely rich, flowing abundance – a memory, so easily projected onto the future as a utopia, before which the world in its present form easily pales into the background.

Of course, in the case of Stavrogin, Dostoevsky is merely giving us an extreme version of a hunger for a radically different order. We encounter this dynamic in a number of other ways in Dostoevsky's writing, with its violent, individual acts of boundary-transcendence that take one beyond the limits of the law and reason (crime, scandal, humiliation; epilepsy, madness, mysticism). What should be noted is the concern that the melancholiac position traditionally provokes, and that makes it – in the eyes of the powers that be – so *suspicious*.

The best known example in the literature is likely Caesar's fear of lean, pale men – a group to which the conspirator Cassius, in particular, belongs – something that Shakespeare, via Plutarch, made use of in his drama *Julius Caesar*.

Let me have men about me that are fat,
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep a-nights.
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.
1:2, r. 189–192

Cassius is a melancholiac with a touch of the proclivity to act suddenly that is characteristic of the choleric. He is dangerous because he does not look content and satisfied; he stands outside the shared repast. He has “famished eyes,” a hungry look, which apparently seeks an entirely different food. In the ensuing exchange we learn that he “reads too much, he is wary ...,” which suggests that a different, spiritual digestive apparatus has replaced the material one. Not only does he read a lot of books, but, it would seem, he also reads, situations and people; he has the ability to “see right through people’s works.”

Melancholy here clearly has a different relationship to political power, because it is hungry for a different, higher order; uncertain as to which.

Such men as he be never at heart’s ease
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,
And therefore are they very dangerous.

The political aspect concerns the border position occupied by the melancholiac, a position which itself is a prerequisite for the reflection and creativity with which this temperament has been associated since ancient times. This situation may lead to the overthrow of a regime, but more often it leads to the creation of another, inner world. Melancholy, at least in the form it has taken in our literature after the Renaissance, is an affect that ambivalently binds the I to itself, and renders externally oriented action – as in the case of Hamlet – impossible.

The transformation of melancholy into a mood that is bittersweet is expressed in several places in Shakespeare, for example: “this desert inaccessible / Under the shade of melancholy boughs” in the pastoral *As You Like It*.³ In this piece, we can see how music, which had traditionally been a cure for melancholy – Caesar fears Cassius partly because he “does not listen to music” – becomes one with this affect. Indeed, it acquires the power to produce gloominess. When Amiens has sung the first verse of the ballad “Under the Greenwood Tree” for the cavalier Jaques, Jaques wants to hear more and more:

³ Act II, Scene vii, ll. 110–111.

Jaques: More, more, I prithee more.

Ami: It will make you melancholy, Monsieur Jaques.

Jaques: I thank it. More, I prithee more. I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs. More, I prithee more.

II:5, r. 9–13

Jaques is not interested in preventing or overcoming his melancholy. He reflects his enjoyment of it. In Shakespeare's powerful image, he is like a weasel, rapaciously sucking in melancholy as if sucking in the contents of an egg. Melancholy is self-affecting, a food that feeds on itself. But this requires the notes and symbols that can fix and generate the fundamental tone, or mood.

The melancholiac is traditionally thought of as artistically creative. But because his world is impoverished and his language poor, this peculiar creative transformation must gain strength from the tone, feel, and rhythm that in part are beyond language. The melancholiac is a predator with a boundless appetite for the most sublime food. He is not only a bestial cannibal, like Stavrogin, but also a refined weasel, like Jaques, with a keen sense for the fine arts.

We shall examine the enigmatic relation of melancholy to an early kind of cannibalism, which psychoanalysis, in particular, stressed. It goes without saying that the *disturbed* relation to food, which, according to this theory, characterizes the melancholiac, cannot be applied to all intellectual or artistic innovation. It suffices here simply to refer to earthly Goethe, who, in his discussions with Eckermann – examining a cast of the ancient sculptor Myron's cow with a suckling calf – was able to claim that it shows us “the nourishing principle, which holds the world up and pervades the entirety of nature.”⁴ For Goethe, or for Rabelais, food is a cosmic principle; the soil of fertility on which all creation is based.⁵

Perhaps, food also plays that same role for the melancholic, though in a more figurative sense – he who questions the normal order of things, who creates

4 Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, Berlin 1955, p. 640.

5 In the case of Rabelais, this has been convincingly demonstrated by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. See *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington 1984.

an other, unknown food, with a variety of meanings. We will trace the desire for this other food through the ages, and scrutinize its relationship to both primitive sacrificial rites as well as contemporary anthropology, philosophy, and linguistic theory.

How does the melancholiac read and write? Is there a deeper tie between reading and eating, between hunger and writing? Is melancholy a key to the understanding of modernity? Is it possible to transfer the idea of a different kind of food to other art forms, such as painting and sculpture, and, further, to culture at large?

Melancholy has a long history with a rich symbolism. We must familiarize ourselves with this history.





Albrecht Dürer *Melencolia I*, 1514

Engraving, 24 × 18.5 cm

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II. Black Bile

Classical Melancholy

I lay myself to rest and become full of bile
that bile is like a sweetness in my soul.
Gunnar Ekelöf, 1960s (unpublished)

According to the ancient teaching on the four humors, black bile (μελαγχολία), when it occurs in excessive quantities, results in lugubriousness in humans. If the balance among the four fluids (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm) is disturbed, pathological conditions of a physical as well as a mental nature arise. According to this theory, the four fluids, or humors, correspond to the four seasons and the four elements; pathology thus constitutes a part of a larger cosmological system.¹

It was the interactions of the four humors that constituted the primary interest of ancient medicine. This theory of the body's diverse fluids and their influence on the body and soul became increasingly complex and refined. In the Middle Ages, the theory was enriched by astrological speculation, and the notion of human *quattuor humores* remains even among Renaissance thinkers as a presupposed starting point for medical research. A medieval draft of a natural-philosophical work, entitled *De mundi celestis terrestrisque*

¹ Our discussion of the ancient science of the four humors follows the first chapter in Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, London 1964. We have made use of the updated German edition, *Saturn und Melancholie: Studien zur Naturphilosophie und Medizin, der Religion und der Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990. [The quotations here are taken from the original English edition. -Translator]

constitutione, gives a clear presentation of the properties of the four humors: “[T]here are four humors in man which resemble the different elements, increase in different seasons and dominate in different ages. Blood resembles air, increases in spring and dominates in childhood. Yellow gall resembles fire, increases in summer and dominates in adolescence. Black gall resembles earth, increases in autumn, dominates in maturity. Phlegm resembles water, increases in winter, dominates in old age. When these abound neither more nor less than is right, man thrives.”²

Of the four humors, one has generated incomparably more interest than the others: black bile. As far back as the earliest texts of Greek medicine we find a distrust of this dark juice, which was often seen as a degenerate and dirty form of yellow bile, or of blood. According to the earliest authors, its influence was entirely negative. The melancholiac – the person destabilized by too much black bile – suffers from psychic disorders that cloud his mind. But compared with the other temperaments – the choleric, the sanguine, and the phlegmatic – melancholy appears to be a complex and ambivalent state of mind that can express itself in radically diverse ways. The other temperaments can also degenerate into pathological conditions and madness, but melancholy possesses a diabolical side and a multifacetedness that has fascinated thinkers.

According to Aristotle’s student Theophrastus, black bile is a dry, cold substance that corresponds to the element Earth.³ It weighs on the human soul and binds man to the Earth; the diseases it causes, when it occurs in quantities that disrupt the balance of the humors, are mainly diseases of the soul: lugubriousness, depression, melancholy. The black bile darkens the light of the soul – in its most malignant form, it drives man to madness and death. But the melancholic condition also has a creative side; this notion isn’t found in the earliest texts, but with Platonic philosophy it becomes an ever increasing part of the speculation surrounding the different temperaments. The

² *De mundi celestis terrestrisque constitutione. A Treatise on the Universe and the Soul*, Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, vol. XI, London 1985, p. 19. [Translation from the Latin modified slightly. -Translator]

³ See Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, p. 48, for a presentation of the relation of the humors to the elements and their differing temperatures.

darkness of melancholy not only means despair and death, but also carries the seed of rebirth – the melancholiac is torn between the destructive forces of the night and a higher form of clarity that makes itself known in and via the night, depression, and madness. In epilepsy – the “sacred disease” of black bile – madness and genius become one.

The crucial transformation in the understanding of melancholy occasioned by Platonic philosophy has to do with the notion of a sacred madness – the divine mania of the artist and poet. In the *Phaedrus*, we find the well-known line of reasoning about an ecstatic clear-sightedness that results from the prophet’s celestial madness, which need not involve a clouding of the mind: “[I]n reality, the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods. For the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona when they have been mad have conferred many splendid benefits upon Greece both in private and in public affairs, but few or none when they have been in their right minds.”⁴ Plato himself never directly connects this sacred madness, which afflicts the lover as well as the prophet and poet, to the influence of black bile. In the *Timaeus*, there is, to be sure, a suggestion of a relationship between the “bitter bile” and prophetic ability, but Plato’s assessment of melancholy is consistently quite low.⁵ Black bile does not bring about any sacred transcendence, but rather provokes the very lowest forms of affect. In the *Phaedrus*, melancholy is related to the cruel temperament of the tyrant, comparable to the temperament of the libertine or inebriate.

But the Platonic idea of a sacred madness very soon came to be connected with the medical speculation surrounding the etiology of the condition. In Aristotelian philosophy, the fully worked through theory of bodily fluids

4 *Phaedrus* 244 a., in Plato, I, *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*, Cambridge, Mass. 1995. Concerning the notion of mania, the following passage from the same dialogue is also of interest: “And it is worthwhile to adduce also the fact that those men of old who invented names thought that madness was neither shameful nor disgraceful; otherwise they would not have connected the very word *mania* with the noblest of arts, that which foretells the future, by calling it the manic art. No, they gave this name thinking that mania, when it comes by gift of the gods, is a noble thing [...]” (ibid)

5 *Timaeus* 71 a, in Plato IX: *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, Cambridge, Mass. 1981.

is brought together with the Platonic notion of a higher, “divine” madness. The temperament of the poet, the philosopher, and the artist is a kind of positive melancholy; black bile produces brilliant states of mind yet simultaneously threatens to thrust the soul into the abyss of madness. Nowhere is this balance as thoroughly examined as in the Aristotle-inspired text fragment known as *Problemata XXX* – sometimes also referred to as *Monograph On Black Bile*. For a long time the text was attributed to Aristotle himself, but today it is generally believed that Theophrastus is the author.⁶

That black bile not only elicits gloominess and sluggishness, – but under favorable conditions, also clear-sightedness and ingenuity – is the starting point of the treatise: “Why does it seem that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholians, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile? An example from heroic mythology is Heracles. For he apparently had this constitution, and therefore epileptic afflictions were called after him ‘the sacred disease’ by the ancients.”⁷ A number of other heroes from mythology and from the Homeric sagas exemplify the ambivalent temperament of the melancholic: paroxysms of rage followed by self-enforced isolation, the ability to act suddenly and decisively, which is followed by sluggish paralysis. A number of key figures from the later Greek period to which Aristotle belonged – Socrates, Plato, and Empedocles – are also said to have suffered from this, the divine curse of black bile. How can we explain this natural gift? What are its components?

A theory of the interaction of the humors and their varying temperatures may be able to explain the emergence of different temperaments. The relation of the humors to the four elements is here taken for granted, but the theory is made more complicated because it also takes into account the ability of the humors to “bind” other elements than their own; black bile is primarily related to the earth, but also possesses the important property of being able to bind air.⁸

⁶ A translation of *Problemata XXX* can be found in Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, pp. 59–76. We have made use of that edition.

⁷ Ibid.

In this reference to the element air, we have the explanation of the close relation of wine and the melancholic temperament to erotic desire – the intimate relationship of the at once intoxicated and melancholic god of wine to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The connection of air to the libido is clearly expressed in Aristotelian pathology,⁹ in *Problemata XXX* it is also the subject of a short digression: “It is for this reason that wine excites sexual desire, and Dionysus and Aphrodite are rightly said to belong together, and most melancholy persons are lustful. For the sexual act is connected with the generation of air, as is shown by the fact that the virile organ quickly increases from a small size by inflation.”¹⁰

8 The analysis of the melancholic state of mind begins with a comparison: “Wine in large quantities manifestly produces in men much the same characteristics which we attribute to the melancholic state, and as is being drunk it fashions various characters, for instance irritable, benevolent, compassionate or reckless ones; /.../.” The comparison to the influence of wine-drinking on the body and soul is based on the increasing scale of intoxication of the mind: “One can see that wine makes the most varied characters, by observing how it gradually changes those who drink it; for those who, to begin with, are cool and taciturn when sober, become more talkative when they have drunk just a little too much; if they drink a little more it makes them grandiloquent and boisterous and, when they proceed to action, reckless; if they drink still more it makes them insolent, and then frenzied; while very great excess enfeebles them completely and makes them as stupid as those who have been epileptic from childhood or as those who are prey to excessive melancholy.”

The range of increasing intoxication corresponds to the different balance of fluids found in various types of people – the growing dominance of black bile and the displacement of the state of mind towards the melancholic. In the sober person, the effect of wine corresponds to the influence of bile: “Now, even as one individual who is drinking changes his character according to the quantity of wine he consumes, so there is for each character a class of men who represents it. For as one man is momentarily while drunk, another is by nature: one man is loquacious, another emotional, another easily moved to tears; for this effect, too, wine has on some people. Hence Homer said in the poem: ‘He says that I swim in tears like a man who is heavy with drinking.’” The correlation between the effect of wine and of black bile on the disposition is explained by reference to their airiness – the two liquids have the same elementary substrate: “Now, melancholy, both the humor and the temperament, produce air; /.../. [W]ine too has the quality of generating air, so wine and the melancholy temperament are of a similar nature.” (*Problemata XXX*, see Note 6.)

9 Aristotle, *De generatione animalum* 728 a, *Complete Works*, vol. I, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton 1984, 1130f.

10 *Problemata XXX*.

The relation of wine and bile to air may explain both the mental as well as the physical characteristics of the melancholiac. A whole symptomatology – of a psychological as well as a physiological nature – is suggested here. The melancholiac suffers from air in the intestines and the concomitant indigestion. As elsewhere, the melancholiac's symptoms range here between extremes – from gluttony to self-starvation. Among the characteristic features of the melancholiac are the emaciated body, but the opposite can also be found.

The ability of the humors to bind air casts light on the characteristics of the melancholic body: “Accordingly those foods and liquids which fill the region of the sexual organs with air have an aphrodisiac effect. Thus dark wine more than anything else makes men such as the melancholiacs are. That they contain air is obvious in some cases; for most melancholy persons have firm flesh and their veins stand out, the reason being the abundance not of blood but of air. However, the reason why not all melancholiacs have hard flesh and why not all of them are dark but only those who contain particularly unhealthy humors, is another question.”¹¹

The melancholiac's indigestion and refusal to eat is a theme that can also be found in many later presentations of this temperament: voracity combined with pathological thinness, extreme exactitude concerning the quantity of food, and unwillingness to take in food at all are characteristics that can be found in descriptions of the condition. Quite obviously, an oral complex sets its mark on the melancholiac's symptoms, a morbid fixation on the very ingestion, the very taking in of food, results in a variety of disruptions of the metabolism, and – as already noted in *Problemata XXX* – bad bodily odors. The diagnosis made by psychoanalysis, that melancholy is a fixation at the oral stage of development, is already anticipated in the earliest descriptions of the effects of black bile.

The melancholic temperament's dualistic structure – frenzy or lethargy, gluttony or self-starvation, sudden lucidity or sluggish stupidity – can, according to the study of the humors, be derived from the dual nature of black bile: its ability to change temperature. The influence of bile depends entirely on whether it is hot or cold, and this particular humor is characterized by its

¹¹ Ibid.

extraordinary ability to change temperature: “[T]he atrabilious humor in the natural constitution is already something mixed as it is a mixture of heat and cold, for of these two things nature is composed. Black bile can therefore become both very hot and very cold, for one and the same substance can naturally undergo both: for example water, which although in itself cold, yet when sufficiently heated (for example, when boiling) is hotter than the flame itself. And stone and iron when red-hot become hotter than charcoal, though they are cold by nature.”¹²

This duality of black bile gives the melancholic temperament its complexity – depending on the temperature of the bile, it can generate a diametrically opposed state of mind. Cold bile weighs on the soul and makes it sluggish: those who bear too much cold, black bile in their bodies easily sink into a depressive gloominess, the limbs becoming weak and sluggish. On the other hand, those who possess hot bile are gripped with ecstatic joy and perspicacity. In reasonable quantities, hot bile has a highly positive impact on human psychic life. But there is danger as soon as the heat threatens the intellect, and fiery intelligence turns into rage and madness. The perfect balance allows for the highest level of mental capacity, but the slightest imbalance threatens to topple man into a state of madness: “For example, those who possess much cold black bile become dull and stupid, whereas those who possess much hot bile are elated and brilliant or erotic or easily moved to anger and desire, while some become more loquacious. Many too are subject to fits of exaltation and ecstasy, because this heat is located near the seat of the intellect; and this is how Sibyls and soothsayers arise and all that are divinely inspired, when they become such not by illness but by natural temperament.”¹³

Ecstasy, prophetic visions, and epileptic seizures are all at the limit where the influence of hot bile threatens to degenerate into madness and rage. Aristotelian pathology here incorporates the holy rapture into its scientific system – the genius of great men can be explained by a favorable body temperature and a slight imbalance of humors. Plato’s concept of a sacred mania that opens the inner eye to the kingdom of the Ideas is not entirely rejected, but rather subsumed under the Aristotelian system. In this way,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Problemata XXX unites Platonic and Aristotelian motifs: the Platonic idea of the kinship of genius with madness meets the scientific ideal of the Aristotelian (Peripatetic) School. With this, the foundation for a powerful tradition in the West is established: “For the first time the dark source of genius – already implicit in the word ‘melancholy’ – was uncovered. Plato’s divine frenzy was the recollection of an otherworldly realm of supracelestial light, now recaptured only in moments of ecstasy: in Peripatetic thought melancholy was a form of experience in which light was a mere correlative of darkness, and in which the way to the light, as later times understood, was exposed to demonic perils.”¹⁴

The double nature of the melancholic temperament – on the one hand, a morbid lugubriousness that beclouds the mind, on the other hand, profound contemplation and creativity – runs like a thread through the West’s theories of artistic creation. The artist is regarded as a brilliant melancholiac: “In Western culture melancholy has, through the centuries, been inseparable from the idea that poets have had about their own condition,” writes Jean Starobinski in *La Mélancolie au miroir*.¹⁵ Melancholy has been seen as the creative state par excellence – an emotional state that is at once both dangerous and privileged, and that makes possible the interior space of thinking, composition, and creativity. The path passes through the abyss of the night and the demonic, but in the darkness, another luster is revealed – in melancholy, the soul gains access to a light that lies beyond the sun of reason.

Galen had already discussed melancholy as a darkening of the understanding: “As the outer darkness inspires fear in almost everyone – unless they are very brave and enlightened – black bile’s dark color also elicits fear, by darkening the seat of reason.”¹⁶ Melancholy obscures reason, it obscures the clear light of the Platonic sun. Black bile elicits the internal eclipse of the soul. But the night of the soul contains not only death and destruction, but also the promise of a different dawn. Later, in modernity, the darkened soul will become melancholy’s *black sun*, an emblem of poetry that adorns the singer’s lute. It makes the night resound:

¹⁴ Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, p. 41.

¹⁵ Starobinski, *La Mélancolie au miroir*, Paris 1989, p. 12.

¹⁶ *De locis affectis III*, 10, cited in Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, p. 55.

Je suis le ténébreux,- le Veuf, – l'inconsolé,
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie:
Ma seule étoile est morte, et mon luth constellé
Porte le soleil noir de la Mélancolie.

(I am the man of gloom – widowed – unconsolated
The prince of Aquitaine, his tower in ruin:
My sole star is dead – and my constellated lute
Bears the Black Sun of Melancholia.)
(*Gérard de Nerval, El Desdichado*)



His wide-open eyes glow white against the dark background. He holds the dead human body in a firm grip with both hands – the head and one of the arms have already been ripped off. The second arm is on its way into the gaping jaw: Saturn wolfs down his own child. Behind him, the night spreads itself out, pitch-black.

Goya's terrifying painting, *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1820), presents the cannibalistic scene with brutal realism. Saturn is a repulsive old man who drools blood and chomps on the flesh of his own offspring. No mitigating symbolism surrounds the repugnant scene. He sits naked in the empty night – the dead body of the child hangs like a scrap of flesh from his massive fists. What does this scene mean? What does Goya's painting represent? It is not without precedents. Goya presumably had the opportunity to study Rubens' *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1636), a closely related painting, both with respect to its motive, and its name. But what distinguishes Goya's image from that of Rubens' and other predecessors is its brutal directness. *Saturn Devouring His Son* is stripped of all mythological and allegorical props and accoutrements. A long-haired old man murders his own child via a cannibalistic act of violence that appears to contain no other moment of depth than pure horror. But Goya's violent painting is a relatively modern manifestation of an ancient complex of representations and ideas, and is comprehensible only on the basis of a study of this tradition: saturnine cannibalism.¹⁷

Saturn (Latin: *Saturnus*) was the Roman name for the god of agriculture and the harvest, whom the Greeks called Kronos. The Athenians prepared a great fertility feast in his honor, at which the slaves and masters celebrated as equals. Kronos was the god of the Golden Age, and the earth's endless abundance was celebrated at his annual festival. The Roman counterpart was the so-called Saturnalia – an orgiastic festival, that went on for several days at a time. A huge banquet was set up in front of the Temple of Saturn. People reveled in food and drink. Saturn, whose attribute was the sickle, was the king of the lost Golden Age one hoped would return – the generous deity of abundance.

But the Kronos cult also has another side, a dark prehistory: Kronos is the cruel father of the gods, who eats his own children. The deepest level of Greek mythology contains a story about castration and divine cannibalism. Kronos rebels against his own father, Uranus, by cutting off his genitalia with a sickle received from his mother, Gaia, the Earth. The sickle, as an attribute of Kronos-Saturn, signifies not only the bountiful harvest, but also the bloody rebellion against the father, the rebellion that gave him power over the other gods. But he himself meets a cruel fate. It was predicted that he would succumb to his own son: this is why Kronos devours his children as they are born. But Rhea, his consort, grieves over this preposterous family situation and manages to save her last-born son, Zeus. She gives Kronos a stone to eat instead. This is his downfall: he is castrated by Zeus and knocked down into the dark dungeon of the underworld.

Kronos is thus not only the generous god of agriculture and the harvest who is celebrated with orgiastic feasts, but also the dreadful father who feasts on the flesh of his own offspring: "Thus, Kronos shows two faces in this myth, the gentle ruler of the Golden Age and the cruel father who devours his own children. This is why human sacrifice has been ascribed to him, and why he has been identified with Baal, also known as Moloch, for whom the Semites sacrificed their own children."¹⁷ The Romans' Saturn is characterized by the

¹⁷ Goya's work on the theme of melancholy and its relation to predecessors like Rubens has been studied in detail by Folke Nordström in *Goya, Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the Art of Goya*, Stockholm 1962.

¹⁸ Martin P:n Nilsson, *Olympen*, Stockholm 1964, p. 42.

same ambivalence; his symbolic presence spans the exhilarated intoxication of the harvest festival and the brutality of the ritual human sacrifices.

Because of the similarity of the words, Kronos came to be identified early on with *chronos*, time. His attributes could thus be given additional significance: the sickle is not only a harvest tool and a weapon of castration, but also the sharp edge of time, which like the blade of the Reaper constantly threatens to sever the thread of life; the saturnine cannibalism could also be seen as a deep allegory for all-encompassing time that both gives birth to and consumes its children. This composite deity, whose attributes became increasingly numerous, was worshipped by religious and mystical sects, including so-called Mithraism, which grew stronger in the Roman world in the first three centuries after Christ. Mithraism had a well-developed theology and cosmology: "The beginning and origin of all things is The Infinite Time, *Aion* or *saeculum*, sometimes referred to as Kronos because of the similarity with the Greek word *chronos*, time, or Saturn."¹⁹ However, Kronos-Saturn came to designate the highest divine principle not only in speculations of the mystical sects, but also in Neoplatonic philosophy.²⁰

The correlation between the planets and the ancient gods that was established in Arabic astrology meant that Kronos-Saturn received additional levels of significance. The astrological speculation came into contact with ancient medicine and natural philosophy: evidence for the belief in a close relationship between Saturn and the melancholic temperament can be found in Arabic texts from the early Middle Ages. In Abu Ma'shar's *Introduction to Astrology* from the middle of the ninth century, a relationship between each of the four temperaments and a planet is established in a systematic way.²¹ To Mars there corresponds the choleric temperament; to Jupiter, the sanguine; to Venus (or the Moon), the phlegmatic; and to Saturn, the melancholic. Like black bile, the

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 165.

²⁰ The basis for this was the explicit acceptance by the neo-Platonists of a correspondence between Kronos and Chronos, that is, with time, which was the grounding principle of Orphic theology. In *The Enneads* Plotinus was able to develop a subtle philosophical interpretation of the myth of the child-eater who is castrated by his own son and ends up in the underworld. Just like time, the highest substance devours everything, but at the same time can be overturned by its own offspring. *The Enneads* V, 1, 7.

²¹ Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, p. 204.

planet Saturn is intrinsically dry and cold. It is the slowest and most remote of the (then) known planets; its influence is entirely negative.

In this way, the theory of the four humors and the associated temperaments was enriched by the symbolism of astrology. Analogies were established between the body's internal organs and the various planets; the influence of the humors within the microcosm of the body corresponded to the macrocosmic effects of the planets. "The spleen has the same position in the body that Saturn has in the world," we read in an astrological text from the tenth century.²² The influence of black bile and the light of Saturn, the characteristics and potential of the melancholiac, are categorized in endless lists. The picture presented of the saturnine person is consistently very. The slow pace of the planet gives his life a disconsolate sluggishness.

The child of Saturn is the most unfortunate of all mortals. The person who stands under the influence of Saturn is characterized by lugubriousness, sluggishness, and an earthbound heaviness. The black color of bile corresponds to the darkness that the cold planet – which at times was seen as a nocturnal sun – elicits in the mind of the saturnine person.²³ Saturn stands for old age, sluggishness, grief or mourning, and poverty. Abu Ma'shar presents a long list of types of people, characteristics, and phenomena which all have a relationship to Saturn: "... blindness, depravity, hatred, cunning, craftiness, fraud, adultery, injuriousness (or damage), a retiring disposition, solitude and difficulties being with other people /.../ the elderly, sullen people, fear, repulsiveness, grief /.../ distress, hard life, narrowness of mind, loss, death, inheritance, complaints about death, orphanhood, old things ..." ²⁴ It is a grim picture that is depicted; there is nothing positive about the gloominess and melancholy of the saturnine person. The ambivalence and dualism that characterized the understanding of melancholy during antiquity (and which once again will become important in Renaissance humanism), has, in medieval Christian thought, given way to an entirely negative image.

²² Ibid. p. 206.

²³ Concerning Saturn as "the nocturnal representative of the sun" see *ibid.* p. 214.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 208.

In theological speculation, melancholy is connected to the Fall: black biliary disease is the result of man's fall from a primordial, paradisiacal state down into the earthly vale of tears. In the 12th century, the Benedictine abbess Hildegard von Bingen depicted in detail how Adam's biting into the forbidden apple poisoned his entire body: "But when Adam sinned, the bile turned into bitterness, and melancholy became the black night of godlessness."²⁵ The malevolent juice – at times referred to in the literature of the Middle Ages as "the bath of Satan" – is, according to Hildegard, the predicament of earthly life itself. The very moment Adam sinks his teeth into the forbidden fruit "melancholy congeals in his blood and leaves, as when a light goes out, a smelly, smoldering wick behind."²⁶ Once again melancholy is connected to an oral incorporation: the sinful bite into the fruit of knowledge. A fatal bite poisons the entirety of existence with black bile. The paradisiacal fire of the soul is gone, what remains is only the foul-smelling substance of the body. The Fall is a descent into the darkness of melancholy – all earthly life is wrapped in its gloomy veil. As Klibansky points out, this idea lives on well into modernity in theological literature. *Melancholy* thus becomes a name for man's plight after the Fall.²⁷

But the medieval speculation over melancholy was not only of a theological nature; it was just as much medical. Melancholy was seen as a disease with complicated symptoms of both a mental and physical nature. One of the recurring characteristics of the saturnine person is his voracity. He eats in an

²⁵ Ibid. p. 141.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 142.

²⁷ In Schelling, we find a speculative explanation for the melancholy that is inherent in all finite life. In *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, man's finite existence is formulated as the absence of a *ground* in man; man does not possess his own ground, but is – in contrast to the divine and infinite essence – dependent on something external to himself, something he can never appropriate and take possession of. Man's essence is characterized by want. This is the "source of the grief (*Traurigkeit*) that attends all finite life /.../. It is this that is the basis of the haze of gloominess (*Schwermut*) which is spread out over all of nature, the profound and indestructible melancholy that exists in all life." *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, Frankfurt am Main 1975 (1809), p. 91. Kierkegaard's word for this religious melancholy is *tungsind* – literally, a kind of heaviness or sluggishness (*tung-*) of the senses, or of the mind (*sind*). Perhaps we also have here the theological background of Martin Heidegger's definition of human finitude as *die Sorge* (grief / care). Cf. Klibansky's introduction to the German edition of his book, *Saturn und Melancholie*.

unusual way – he gorges without actually taking in the nutrients of the food, and he is either morbidly thin, or heavy and immobile. This was a prominent feature even in the medicine of antiquity: the melancholiac has difficulties with the intake of food.²⁸ According to the physicians Diocles and Galen, food that is difficult to digest elicits black bile and symptoms of melancholy. Conversely, an excess of black bile leads to problems with the intake of all food. When the blood in the abdominal region is mixed with too much dark bile, fierce vomiting follows – the body is emptied of bile and bitter mucus. These attacks are followed by a pathological hunger, but each intake of food is associated with extreme danger. The melancholiac is thought by these authors to be at constant risk for anorexia and bulimia: he is tossed between extremes.

Jean Starobinski has also pointed out the close connection between melancholy and digestive disorders.²⁹ Medical treatment of melancholy has most often included a meticulous diet. The “black bilious type” overreacts to any deviation from normalcy – there is a constant threat of an attack of vomiting. This complex puts its stamp not only on the theories of antiquity, but is also present in medieval and Renaissance medical thought. In Robert Burton’s exhaustive work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), several chapters are devoted to the melancholiac’s digestive difficulties. Burton’s presentation is a unique blend of quotation and reflection; occasionally it is a mere catalog of melancholic characteristics and symptoms. Under the chapter heading *Bad Diet a Cause. Substance. Quality of Meats.*, the foodstuffs that provoke melancholy are stacked up upon one another in an almost endless list: “Milk and all that comes of milk, as butter and cheese, curds &c. increase melancholy /.../ Amongst fowl, peacocks and pigeons, all fenny fowl are forbidden, as ducks, geese, swans, herons, cranes, coots, didappers, waterhens, with all those teals, curs, sheldrakes, and speckled fowls, that come hither in winter out of Scandia, Muscovy, Greenland, Friezland, which half the year are covered all over

²⁸ In his *Melancholie und Melancholiker in den medizinischen Theorien der Antike*, Berlin 1966, Hellmut Flash has highlighted the close relation of melancholy to disturbances of metabolism. See also Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, p. 100 concerning the melancholiac’s voracity and disturbances of digestion and excretion.

²⁹ Starobinski, *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie, des origines à 1900*, Basel 1960.

with snow, and frozen up. Though these be fair in feathers, pleasant in taste, and have a good outside, like hypocrites, white in plumes, and soft, their flesh is hard, black, unwholesome, dangerous, melancholy meat; they load & putrefy the stomach, saith Isaac. Their young ones are more tolerable, but young pigeons he quite disproves.”³⁰ The enumeration of examples is interspersed not only with his own comments, but also with long quotes from doctors, philosophers, and other historical authorities; Burton’s knowledge is encyclopedic.

What conclusions about the relationship between melancholy and diet can be drawn from Burton’s presentation? “Generally, all such meats as are hard of digestion breed melancholy.”³¹ The more indigestible, the greater the metabolic disturbance, and the greater the risk of melancholy. Beyond general truths of that sort, there is perhaps not much more that can be said about the endless list. But this testifies to the melancholiac’s obsession with food intake per se, a fixation that finds an explanation first in psychoanalytic theory.

What relationship does this melancholic focus on eating have to saturnine eating in particular – the consumption by the god of time of his own children?

During the Middle Ages, the entire iconography of saturnine cannibalism – the old man, the sickle, the symbolism of bounty and all-consuming sign of time – comes into contact with the speculation of natural philosophy and medicine surrounding melancholy. This is evident in the pictures of the various children of the planets that become common during the early Renaissance, but which occur even earlier, in, for example, manuscripts inspired by astrology and Orientalism.³² The child of Saturn emerges in these images as someone weighed down by disease and dogged by bad luck; the melancholiac is obsessed with the passage of time, of decay, and death – like time, he seems to consume himself from within. Saturn is often portrayed as an old man, or a cripple with a crutch. In one hand he carries a sickle, in the other, a child he is about to devour.

³⁰ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Bell & Jordan-Smith, New York 1984, p. 191.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, p. 303f.

It is in these astrological images that the European tradition of paintings of Saturn has its roots. Saturn, the monstrous old man who, like time, devours his own offspring, is a recurrent theme in the tradition of great painting. The god of melancholy gives birth and consumes. As punishment for his bestial deed, he is given a stone to eat. Is it any coincidence that this voracious deity creates digestive difficulties for those unfortunate people who find themselves under his influence?



The idea of melancholy as a natural prerequisite for genius grew tremendously during the Renaissance. The Florentine Neoplatonic thinkers, especially Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), developed the view of artists and philosophers as melancholics. The melancholic man is, according to Mirandola, on a narrow ridge between two abysses; he is torn between two extremes, between animal and god. Whether he develops in the direction of the beasts or the direction of the divine depends on how he manages his gift.

The double nature of melancholy has, as we have seen, an ancient origin. The ambivalence that existed in the ancient concept of melancholy is here sharpened even further: the melancholiac has access to the light of genius, but also to animal forces that threaten to eclipse all reason.³³

It is only with the Renaissance philosophers, above all Ficino, that the Aristotelian understanding of the melancholy of the “great men” is definitively united with the Platonic notion of a higher, creative madness. The melancholiac is described in Ficino’s *De vita triplici* as an extraordinary person; the influence of black bile opens the eyes of the child of Saturn to truths that remain inaccessible to common sense: “Saturn sets its mark not on those of ordinary disposition with ordinary destinies, but on those who are different from others, divine or brutish, blissful or depressed by the deepest of

³³ In *The Optick Glasse of Humors*, London 1607, p. 64, the British 16th century thinker Walkington captures this dualism: “The melancholic man is alleged by the wise to be *aut Deus aut Daemon*, either angel in heaven or the devil in hell: for the person who is dominated by this fluid has a soul that is, via heavenly contemplation, either filled by blissful Elysium and paradise, or, via cynical meditation, by a terrible and hellish purgatory.”

miseries.”³⁴ It is in Florentine Neoplatonism that the modern understanding of the artist is born: the creative man as both an oversensitive and obsessed being, who is tossed between lucidity and fury – a genius. Ficino’s melancholic soul, writes Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, “is yanked back and forth between a self-affirmation that has grown into hubris and self-doubt that approaches despair. But it is precisely the experience of this dualism that allows man to discover a new spiritual form that is determined by this tragic-heroic discord: the spiritual form of the modern genius. And it is here that one understands that the self-realization of the modern genius was only possible in the spirit of Saturn and melancholy, and, conversely, that the generally accepted notions, ‘Saturn’ and ‘melancholy,’ would acquire new spiritual determinations.”³⁵

In this way, the origin of the modern notion of the genius is pushed much further back in history than is customary. The aesthetic theories of Kant and the Romantic philosophers are, according to this view, not possible without the ambivalent melancholiacs of the Renaissance, whose spiritual disposition anticipates the romantic genius who in a similar manner is “yanked back and forth” between self-affirmation and despair.³⁶

Entirely in line with the tradition, Kant describes the melancholiac as a riven being, torn between madness and a genial lucidity, between darkness and sublime illumination. “The history of the question of melancholy is played out within the framework of this dialectic. Here, the magic of the Renaissance constitutes the culmination,” claims Walter Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. While the Middle Ages produced a thoroughly dark depiction of melancholy as a “satanic bath,” Renaissance philosophy brought to the fore the positive aspects highlighted in the theories of antiquity. With characteristic condensation, Benjamin sketches this reversal:

34 Ficino, *De vita triplici*, III, 2, Basel 1576, cited in Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl, p. 366.

35 Ibid. 358.

36 In his *Beobachtung über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, *Werke*, vol. II, Berlin 1912, p. 258ff., Kant describes the melancholiac as a human being filled with sublime feelings. The melancholic human being has access to ideas of infinity, which raises him above the earthly but which also places moral criteria at his disposal by which he can make a harsh judgment about his own existence. He therefore not infrequently suffers of “Trauer ohne Grund,” a groundless sorrow that darkens his entire existence and can degenerate into a pathological state.

During the Renaissance, which reinterpreted the saturnine melancholy in terms of a theory of genius in a way more radical than that seen in antiquity, the “fear of Saturnus stood,” as Warburg expressed it, “at the center of the belief in the power of the heavenly bodies.” The Middle Ages had already taken possession of the saturnine circle through a series of restructuring operations. The ruler over the month, “the Greek god of time and the Roman god of the seed” was transformed into death, with his sickle, whose cut no longer has anything to do with the seed, but with the human race, just as it no longer is the yearly cycle, with its recurrence of sowing, harvesting, and lying fallow, that governs time, but rather the inexorable march of all life towards death. But this era, which sought to be open, at all costs, to the source of occult insights into nature, posed the question about melancholy of how to glean from Saturn its spiritual forces, and yet escape madness. It was a matter of releasing the sublime melancholy, Marsilio Ficino’s and Melanchthon’s *Melencolia* “*illa heroica*,” from the base and pernicious. To the precise dietetics of the body and the soul was added the astrological enchantment: The ennobling of melancholy is the central theme of Marsilio Ficino’s *De vita triplica*. The magic square, which is marked on the canvas over the head of Dürer’s “Melancholia,” is the sign of the planet Jupiter, whose influence is opposed to the turbid forces of Saturn /.../ Under Jupiter’s influence, the harmful influences are transformed into a blessing, Saturn becomes the protector of the most sublime investigations; even astrology is part of Saturn’s sphere. In this way, Dürer was able to achieve what he wanted: “he, in the saturnine features, also expressed the divine concentration of the spirit.”³⁷

In its pure form, Saturn’s influence is harmful. It causes disease and madness. But the saturnine forces can be refined by the influence of Jupiter, the sanguine planet. It is a question of the precise dosage. In combination with Jupiter, it is possible to experience the positive energies of melancholy without being cast into the abyss of insanity.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I, Frankfurt 1974 pp. 328–329.

In Renaissance treatises on the temperaments, this positive melancholy – *melancholia generosa* – was considered the mood of philosophical contemplation, which resulted in a variety of artistic representations of the melancholy personified, as someone profoundly lost in the act of sublime contemplation. Most famous, and without a doubt the most analyzed, is Albrecht Dürer's copperplate engraving *Melencolia I* from 1514, to which Benjamin refers in the quotation above (see appendix). It bears clear signs of the speculations of Florentine Neoplatonism: with her head resting heavily in her left hand, the female Melancholia sits, with her large angel wings folded down, surrounded by Saturn and all the symbols and emblems of the period. As Benjamin points out, dogs are traditionally thought to be closely related to the spleen, and hence to the "splenetic" melancholiac; this is why there is a dog sleeping on the floor in front of Melancholia. Behind her, there is an hourglass, a scale, and a copperplate which symbolize Jupiter's presence – only via Jupiter's positive influence can the lethal forces of Saturn be bridled and turned into positive melancholy. On the floor, there are tools. Further back in the image is a mysterious geometric body (a gigantic crystal?) and in her hand is a compass; this is not the black melancholy of pathological fatigue, but rather the elevated melancholy of contemplation and science. The light of genius shines in the background in the form of a comet. A ladder leads up into the sky.

Klibansky-Panofsky-Saxl crown their great study of melancholy with a meticulous close reading of Dürer's engraving. Every detail – the hourglass, the scale, the tools, the compass, the clock, the sleeping dog, the Jupiter amulet (*Mensula lovis*), the large glove, the polyhedron, the rainbow, the comet, the cherub – is interpreted in depth, in light of astrological, philosophical, and religious ideas of the time. The most important point of reference, according to Panofsky who authored the chapter, is Ficino's *De vita triplici*, with its ideas on the refining of the influence of Saturn via Jupiter. Dürer wanted to give form to the frustration of the melancholiac – the genius who tries in vain to appropriate Saturn's positive forces. She does not succeed in lifting her large wings, but sits, brooding raptly, her head resting in her hand. Around her are scientific tools, but she cannot use them; she sits staring listlessly. The famished dog lying unconscious on the floor further underlines the depressive atmosphere. Dürer's engraving is about failure and frustration.

This interpretation has been criticized sharply by Frances Yates, who believes that the image actually captures a moment of inspiration.³⁵ The passivity of the figure of melancholy does not express frustration, says Yates, but rather sublime contemplation. To understand this picture, it is not enough to refer to Ficino and Florentine Neoplatonism. More important is the work of a completely different thinker: the German Renaissance mystic Agrippa and his work *De occulta philosophia*, which was first published in 1533, but which Dürer demonstrably had access to in manuscript form. Here, we have a theory of the different forms of influence that melancholic fluid (*humor melancholicus*) possesses. A person's state of mind depends on which part of the soul is affected by the demons of black bile. In a key passage, Agrippa distinguishes three different forms of melancholic inspiration:

The *humor melancholicus*, when it takes fire and glows, generates the frenzy (*furor*) which leads us to wisdom and revelation, especially when it is combined with a heavenly influence, above all that of Saturn ... Therefore Aristotle says in the *Problemata* that through melancholy some men have become divine beings, foretelling the future like Sybils ... while others have become poets ... and he says further that all men who have been distinguished in any branch of knowledge have generally been melancholics.

Moreover, this *humor melancholicus* has such power that they say it attracts certain demons into our bodies, through whose presence and activity men fall into ecstasies and pronounce many wonderful things ... This occurs in three different forms corresponding to the threefold capacity of our soul, namely the imagination (*imaginatio*), the rational (*ratio*), and the mental (*mens*). For when set free by the *humor melancholicus*, the soul is fully concentrated in the *imagination*, and it immediately becomes a habitation for the lower demons, from whom it often receives wonderful instruction in the manual arts; thus we see a quite unskilled man suddenly become a painter or an architect, or a quite outstanding

³⁵ Frances Yates, "The Occult Philosophy and Melancholy" in *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, London 1979.

master in another art of some kind; if the demons of this species reveal the future to us, they show us matters related to natural catastrophes and disasters, for instance approaching storms, earthquakes, cloud-burst, or threats of plague, famine and devastation ... But when the soul is fully concentrated in the *reason*, it becomes the home of the middle demons; thereby it attains knowledge of natural and human things; thus we see a man suddenly become a philosopher, a physician, or an orator; and of future events they show us what concerns the overthrow of kingdoms and the return of epochs, prophesying in the same way the Sibyl prophesied to the Romans ... But when the soul soars completely to the *intellect* it becomes the home of the higher demons, from whom it learns the secrets of divine matters, as for instance the law of God, the angelic hierarchy, and that which pertains to the knowledge of eternal things and the soul's salvation; of future events they show us for instance approaching prodigies, wonders, a prophet to come, or the emergence of a new religion, just as the Sibyl prophesied Jesus Christ long before he appeared.³⁹

Why is Dürer's engraving entitled *Melencolia I*? The numbering suggests that it is a matter of its being the first image in a series. Yates's thesis is that Dürer had Agrippa's concept of melancholy's three levels in mind: *Melencolia I* is an illustration of the influence of black bile on the imagination, its lowest form of expression. The soul thereby becomes "a habitation for the lower demons, from whom it often receives wonderful instruction in the manual arts." Dürer's melancholic figure is not in a state of depressive passivity, but rather one of a visionary trance. That she is not using her tools is not a sign of failure, but of the internal concentration that characterizes the first level of melancholic inspiration. The "lower demons" have just taken their place in the soul. "The only sense which is alive and waking," writes Yates, "is the artist's hand, the hand of the *putto* recording the vision with his engraving tool – the hand of Dürer himself recording his psychology of inspiration in this marvellous engraving."⁴⁰

³⁹ Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, cited in Yates, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Yates, p. 56.

Yates may well exaggerate Dürer's dependence on Agrippa's theory of melancholy's three levels, but his criticism of Panofsky seems reasonable: *Melencolia I* hardly expresses depression and frustration, but rather a kind of contemplative elation. Panofsky, despite his specialization in Renaissance emblematics seems not entirely convincing on some key points. One observant reader who has pointed out a great many unclear issues is Gunnar Ekelöf.⁴¹ Ekelöf is not inhibited by any great respect for Panofsky's encyclopedic knowledge. He approaches Dürer's image with the curious eyes of a newcomer: Can we not make out a face in the geometric body? Might it be Dürer himself? Are the polyhedrons, as Panofsky argues, in point of fact an illustration of certain geometric laws? Isn't it rather a gigantic crystal, of a type one actually finds on Dürer's home turf in southern Germany?

Ekelöf also directs our attention to a small object at the bottom of the image, in the right-hand corner. What is it that peeks out from under Melancholia's skirt? A mundane, and given the spiritual symbolism, all too physiological item for Panofsky to be willing to attach any great importance to: "The small clyster syringe that discretely sticks out from under her skirt suggests that the melancholiac should avoid the constipation that results from being too sedentary."⁴² In a previous study, Panofsky himself suggested that it might be an enema apparatus, but has since, as Ekelöf points out, "retracted [it] and explained that he recognizes the object, in a contemporary engraving of a different master, as the opening of a bellows, which is clearly unlikely, since a bellows would not have been able to fit in such a discrete spot under the hem of the skirt, nor could it have been so diminutive."⁴³

If Ekelöf is right, the small syringe is a reminder of a less elevated side of the complex of melancholy: the link between black bile and digestion, and, in particular, disturbances in the digestive apparatus. The "lower demons," which, according to Agrippa, bring about melancholy, perhaps come from a region lower than even Panofsky or Yates imagined; not from a dark region

41 Ekelöf, "Dürers melankoli" [Dürer's Melancholy] in *Gunnar Ekelöf skriver om konst* [Gunnar Ekelöf writes on Art], Stockholm 1984, pp. 26–29.

42 Ibid. p. 28.

43 Ibid. p. 29.

of the abstract geography of occult philosophy, but from very concrete abdominal regions of the melancholiac.

Ekelöf's attentive eye – directed towards a small detail at the bottom, in the corner – and his intuitive insight into the problematic position of the enema syringe in Dürer's emblematic image of melancholy, can serve as a kind of *punctum* around which this essay revolves. This seemingly marginal detail reveals the ambivalence of the melancholic mood and black bile: on the one hand, the bile produces the most elevated and contemplative state of mind, on the other hand, because of this bodily fluid, the organism is threatened by terrible convulsions – vomiting and acute stomach problems.

Black bile hereby acquires a dual and difficult to define position in the entire economy constituted by the interaction of the humors. It is at once the most noble of the humors – able to bring the mind into the highest form of harmony – and a threat to the balance in the body and the psyche. Without a small dose of black bile, the mind does not reach the heights of genius, but the slightest surplus of the black juice threatens to burst the integrity of the economy. The organism is brought completely out of balance – the finely tuned contemplation transmogrifies into bodily depletion and feelings of disgust.

The Renaissance idea of a *melancholia generosa* – a through and through positive melancholy that is refined by a painstaking art of determining the right dosage – is the most extreme expression of the elevated and sophisticated side of the black bile complex. It is about a kind of sublimation: the humors and the physiological aspect of the melancholic state completely disappear from the picture and make room for the sublime dolorousness of genius. It is unlikely that that state has been captured anywhere else with the same poetic incisiveness as in Dürer's engraving. But even here there is a reminder of another aspect of contemplative temperament: among all the allegories for time, death, astrology, and occult science, the clyster syringe constitutes the inescapable trace of excrement that may be inherent in all refinement or sublimation.



The philosophers of the Renaissance point out the close connection between creativity and melancholic lugubriousness; the soul of the artist is torn between the darkness of depression and the light of creativity. The night of the soul,

from which the spark of genius springs, is a solitary darkness. The relation of melancholy to isolation and solitude is already suggested in ancient sources, but becomes a central topic in Renaissance treatises: the artist enters into himself, into an inner darkness, and there, finds the source of creativity. Robert Burton, in his comprehensive study, discusses the pathological desire of the melancholiac for isolation, his misanthropic no to the world. Is melancholy the result of solitude, or is the desire for isolation a result of the melancholy? Burton never answers the question unequivocally, but the kinship of the two phenomena is stressed again and again.

In Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* from 1580, the relationship among solitude, melancholy, and creativity is dealt with in a way more thorough than we find anywhere else. Here, this relationship is described as the most basic precondition of writing: "It was a melancholic mood – that is, a mood that is the precise opposite of my natural disposition – elicited by the bleak solitude that I threw myself into a few years ago that instilled in me this crazy idea of writing. And then, when I discovered that I was completely empty and destitute of other subject matters, I took myself as subject and object of study."⁴⁴ Montaigne does not regard melancholy as his natural temperament, but rather as a state into which he conveyed himself by radical isolation. His psychic disposition is in point of fact mixed, and thus – according to authorities of the time – ideal: "My temperament is between the jovial and the melancholic, moderately sanguine and warm."⁴⁵

Melancholy arose from intentional isolation, from the decision to turn one's back on the world in order to devote the remainder of life to the cultivation of one's own soul. This introverted movement is a first precondition for writing – it is by means of solitude that Montaigne becomes melancholic. And from the melancholy of the soul, the desire to write is born:

Recently I retired to my estates, determined to devote myself as far as I could to spending what little life I have left quietly and privately; it seemed to me then that the greatest favor I could do for my mind was to leave it

⁴⁴ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, London, New York 1991, p. 149 [Translation modified slightly. -Translator]

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 729. [Translation modified slightly. -Translator]

in total idleness, caring for itself, concerned only with itself, calmly thinking of itself. I hoped it could do that more easily from then on, since with the passage of time it had grown more mature and put on weight.
But I find –

Variam semper dant otia mentis

[idleness always produces fickle changes of mind]

– that on the contrary it bolted off like a runaway horse, taking far more trouble over itself than it ever did over anyone else; it gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another, without order or fitness, that, so as to contemplate at my ease their oddness and their strangeness, I began to keep a record of them, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.⁴⁶

Melancholic madness arises from isolation: the imagination gallops away and creates fantastic monsters. The ego, or “I,” is threatened with utter lunacy, but the “I” manages to stem the movement of the bolting horse by corralling the fantasies in writing. The ability of the written sign to fix the rushing images permits the “I” to find a new stability; the soul gets the opportunity to reflect on its creations – writing means a rescue from the chaotic night of melancholy. This is Montaigne’s circle: the soul turns away from the world and moves into itself. In the inner night, melancholy and madness threaten – but by means of writing, the soul can return to the world.

In *Montaigne en mouvement*, Jean Starobinski sees this circle as the most general motion of the essays: from a deep skepticism towards outer reality, there follows an emphasis on the inner life of the “I,” an inner searching which, by means of the investigation itself, is able to return to the external reality that was initially negated.⁴⁷ This is the general pattern of the essays, but it is the endless variations that give them their luster. The same melancholic

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 10.

⁴⁷ Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement*, Paris 1982.

trope recurs again and again, but with Montaigne's *Essays*, writes Starobinski, it is like a musical composition: "All the variations in a *chaconne* can be inferred from the first notes of the base, nonetheless, the piece is not finished until the entire development is complete."⁴⁸ Montaigne's music streams out from melancholy's night, but it is nonetheless not a death fugue; it is rather a composition about life rediscovered. It is about overcoming darkness and melancholy. Literature serves as the way back out into the light. What does the actual turning point look like – what is it about melancholy that makes this reversal possible?

Even this very critical point has been discussed by previous writers, and Montaigne is hardly the first to locate the inversion in the dark depths of the soul. "And the night was dark and lit up the night," we read in John of the Cross.⁴⁹ The idea that darkness, by being concentrated maximally, can produce a different kind of light is also found in alchemy, in which the pitch black *nigredo* phase is a necessary phase in the production of the shimmering, brilliant gold. So the notion of inversion itself is not new, but Montaigne is the first to allow the overcoming of night and melancholy to coincide with the actual act of writing: by writing, the soul is saved from its darkness and solitude. Perhaps he could be called the first writer in the modern sense.⁵⁰ With Montaigne, writing becomes the solitary soul's deeply personal concern; the literary text arises from a personal crisis, but at the same time writing is a rescuing from darkness.

Here, the Renaissance's *melancholia generosa* becomes a name for the positive turning point where the isolation is broken – where the silence of internal contemplation is transformed into writing. "I'm not actually melancholic, but dreamy," writes Montaigne, but adds: "There is nothing which I, from the very beginning, have devoted myself to more than fantasy images of death."⁵¹ Melancholy occurs when the "I" isolates itself and gives itself over completely to fantasies of death. The inner eclipse of the soul is imminent:

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 9.

⁴⁹ Saint John of the Cross, cited in Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Paris 1977, p. 203.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of Montaigne's originality and the relation between his *Essays* and Augustine's *Confessions*, see M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*, London 1983.

⁵¹ *Montaigne*, p. 94.

the light of reason gives way to the night of madness. But solitude need not result in madness; it can also be cultivated, and can make possible contemplative depths. Montaigne stresses the necessity of solitude for all intellectual activity, not only an external solitude, but the soul's radical isolation: "This is why it is not enough to keep one's distance from the crowd, it is not enough to change location; we must get away from the mass that exists within ourselves. We have to withdraw and reclaim ourselves."⁵² By means of this phenomenological reduction, the "I" acquires access to an inner space, a separate place for deep philosophical meditation:

We need to secure an inner space for ourselves that is ours alone, totally free, where we establish our real freedom, our most important refuge and solitude. It is here where our normal conversations between us and ourselves should take place, so personal that no external relations and connections may be present; here, we will be able to talk and laugh as if we had no wife, children, or possessions, no attendants or servants, so that there will not be anything new for us when the time comes for us to lose them. We have a soul that can turn to itself, it can keep itself company, it can attack and defend, receive and give away; let us not fear, then, that we in this solitude will stagnate from boring idleness: If you are in a solitary place, be a mass for yourself!⁵³

Seclusion is necessary for the philosophical person. But it brings with it melancholy's ambivalence of mind. Montaigne is surely familiar with the classical view of the dual nature of melancholy: "Plato says that melancholiacs are the most educable and prominent – but at the same time, no others have such a clear disposition to madness. Countless spirits have been demolished under their own power and adroitness."⁵⁴ Solitude is dangerous, but indispensable. Montaigne himself withdraws back to his secluded tower, where he can cultivate his melancholy in peace and quiet. It never degenerates into madness, but rather is resisted, and ennobled into writing.

⁵² Ibid. p. 263.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 270. [Translation modified. -Translator]

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 548. [Translation modified. -Translator]



At that time, medical research into melancholy and its relationship to mania began to develop; here, a less hopeful picture of the melancholic condition is presented. A confusing constellation of symptoms characterizes the melancholiac: “Some of them believe they are animals, and mimic them with sounds and gestures. Some believe themselves to be glass containers, and avoid people passing by so as not to be broken. Others fear death, which, however, they often attend to themselves. Still others imagine that they are guilty of some crime and tremble and shake as soon as they see someone coming towards them, fearing that he will take him by the collar and lead him off to prison, where the hand of justice will deal a fatal blow.”⁵⁵ Michel Foucault has made a detailed study of the emergence of the vision of melancholy and mania in the medical research of the 16th and 17th centuries, and which, in a different form, persists even in the psychoanalytic idea of a manic-depressive complex. In these medical reports, a group of symptoms continually recurs in a slightly different guise: obsession with death, morbid guilt, and a desire to isolate oneself. The melancholiac seeks solitude: “Whence comes the melancholiac’s longing for solitude? Why do they shun the company of others? This makes them even more dependent on the object of their delirium, or on their dominant passions ...”⁵⁶ The melancholiac is morbidly introspective, obsessed with his own internal, painful state, often with a complete inability to communicate. Foucault sketches a timeline of solitude from Montaigne’s time, up to Enlightenment medicine, where he finds the following account of the melancholiac’s disposition, “they avoid the company of others, love solitary places and wander around without knowing where they are going. Their skin has a yellowish tone, their tongues are dry like people who are parched, their eyes are dry, sunken, and never moistened by tears. The entire body is burned, and the face is somber and full of grief and fear.”⁵⁷

This is a totally different form of isolation than that which Montaigne discusses – from this solitude, there is no turning back. Montaigne’s melancholy

⁵⁵ Johann Weyer, *De praestigiis daemonum* (1563) cited in Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, Paris 1964, p. 106.

⁵⁶ Foucault, p. 108.

⁵⁷ Ibid. pp. 114–115.

arises from an intentional seclusion, thus, it can also be overcome by a linguistic and artistic act. In the sphere of pathology, we have a different scheme, a different order of things: solitude is the result of a morbid disposition that can not be overcome by the will. According to the medical science of the day, only a violent course of treatment could save the melancholic person – the dark fluids that pressed their way into his body must be driven out by force. No refinement of melancholy is thought to be possible here; the only development that medicine assumes possible is a transition to mania, a transformation to which we will return. A Montaignesque *melancholia generosa* is not hinted at in the medicine of the day – the pathological view of melancholy does not point to any higher light, but rather straight into madness' night. In Montaigne, literature steps in as a salvation. Writing is intimately linked to death – it arises in the inner night, as a way out of the total darkness. As Starobinski puts it: “the threat of loss accords an infinite value to that which still can be held on to and articulated; at the same time, death makes it permissible to take all possible liberties with language in order to uncover the most secret of thoughts.”⁵⁸ It is death that liberates language, that impels the essays' painstaking exploration of life's darker side, of love and erotic desire: “It is Thanatos who liberates Eros, who gives him a voice.”⁵⁹

It is against the backdrop of death that Montaigne sketches life. His writing is as much *thanatographic* as it is *biographic* – here, life and death are twisted together. Literature is born out of a proximity to death, while writing, for Montaigne, is the only way to overcome death. Starobinski: “For him, writing is the last refuge, a way to continue the conversation from a distance, and to extend his voice beyond the grave.”⁶⁰

Montaigne's description of his creative work, and its relationship to the inner space of melancholy and contemplation, points directly to a modern problem. Literature arises out of melancholy, but is itself not essentially melancholic – the act of writing is a kind of transgression, if only a temporary one. A similar perspective, and a similar practice, can be found in many modern writers. In writing, we have, according to Montaigne, a salvation from

⁵⁸ Starobinski, p. 228.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 271.

introspection and subjectivism: the literary language allows the “I” to reach beyond itself – the act of writing liberates one from the tie to a painful interiority.

In this way, literature becomes salvation – if never definitive – from the mute darkness. Art is born from this night as an *other night*, a light that springs forth from a condensed darkness. Such is the Orphic eye of art. The name of the critical turning point where the night is broken would thus be Eurydice. As Maurice Blanchot puts it: “When Orpheus descends to Eurydice, art is the power that causes the night to open. Because of the power of art, the night welcomes him; it becomes the welcoming intimacy, the understanding and the harmony of the first night. But Orpheus has gone down to Eurydice: for him, Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead. She is the instant in which the essence of the night approaches as the other night.”⁶¹



⁶¹ Maurice Blanchot, “The Gaze of Orpheus” in Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, transl. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Barrytown 1981, p. 99.

III. Black Sun

Modern Melancholy

I thought I saw a black sun in the deserted sky and a red ball of blood over the Tuileries. I said to myself: "The eternal night begins, and it will be terrible. What will happen when people realize that there no longer is a sun?"

Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*

Die Schwermut, aufs neue geduldet, pendelt sich ein.

Paul Celan

In 1632, Milton wrote the allegorical didactic poem about the melancholic temperament "Il penseroso," a contrasting side piece to the poem on sanguinity, "L'Allegro." It was to become an extremely important basis for the surging cult of melancholy in northern European literary composition and philosophy at the end of the 18th century. Melancholy became a muse, and Milton's apostrophizing suggestion was adopted:

But hail thou Goddess, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy.

But even though Milton could praise the joy of the companion poem, and thereby strike a balance between two equal approaches to life, the new sentimental tendencies in Europe had a decided preference for the Neoplatonically colored "divine melancholy." To be sure, the classical theory of the temperaments had

been abandoned, but melancholy, in its lone majesty, had rather strengthened its position.

To be sure, melancholy had a strong presence in the antithetical, often deeply pessimistic Baroque period. But the image of melancholy in the North European Baroque was, unlike in the Italian, very somber and strongly influenced by Luther. He saw gloominess, with which he himself was very much familiar, as a tribulation, a disease which the ancient philosophers had talked about, or as a deep offense against God, which the Scholastic theologians had dealt with under the name *acedia* / *tristitia*. Melancholy had its roots in evil.¹

Not until the end of the 18th century would the understanding of melancholy be freed from its classical and theological ballast and acquire its modern formulation, linked to man as a unique, sentient being. At the same time, this newer notion of melancholy was once again connected with the classical notion of the genius, which flourished in the Italian Renaissance. It was now invoked as the queen of elevated thought, or as the redemptive song of the subjective depths.² *Weltschmerz* became fashionable, to which Goethe's *Werther* is testimony, and Sweden's Bengt Lidner gorged on the sensual pleasure of tears.

This sentimentalism, as we know, anticipates the Romantic movement in a decisive way.³ The French Romantic Chateaubriand has been described as the incarnation of a new kind of poet: "He is the new man ... This is a man with an exuberant sensitivity, bathing in his own tears ... This is the melancholiac whose only reference is to himself."⁴

1 Luther stigmatizes melancholy in among other things the table talk, "Satan est Spiritus tristitiae ..." See Klara Obermüller's *Melancholie in der deutschen Lyrik*, Bonn 1974, p. 29. Perhaps more than anyone, Walter Benjamin has somewhat one-sidedly given Luther the blame for melancholy in the German Baroque period in his otherwise rich *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Frankfurt am Main 1978 (1928). Other factors were the Copernican Doctrine, which finds expression in Jakob Böhme's melancholy, and not least the Thirty Years War. See Obermüller, p. 44.

2 The German poet Johann Jakob Guoeth (1743–1766) opens his poem "An die Melancholie" with the words "Komm, Königin erhabner weiser Gedanken ..." and ends it with "Mein Lied bist du, Melancholie."

3 See Martin Lamm, *Upplysningens romantik* [The Romanticism of the Enlightenment] I-II, 1920. New ed. 1963.

4 Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1969, p. 71.

How should we understand this strange turn, on the threshold of the modern era, which makes melancholy the dominant literary and philosophical temperament?

It took some time before the classical dialectic between sadness and joy, which Milton interpreted in his pair of poems, lost its foothold and was transformed into the pathologically pointed alteration between depression and mania that characterizes the modern era; and which Freud, among others, describes in his analysis of melancholy. The Renaissance genius Giordano Bruno coined the maxim “in hilaritate tristis: in tristitia hilaris” – “in sadness, happy: in happiness, sad” – an expression of which, much later, the modern pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer would make a sublime analysis, though in an inverted form:

Speaking generally, the genius' melancholy depends in large measure on this: that the more enlightened the will to live of a clear intellect is, the more clearly he will perceive the misery of his condition. The turbid mood, so often observed, of the highly gifted minds, have as their emblem Mont Blanc, whose peak is usually covered in clouds: but when at some point, particularly early in the morning, the cloud covering dissipates and the mountain, bathed in the red of the light of the sun, now looks down upon Chamonix from its heavenly heights above the clouds, then it is a sight that opens up the depths of the hearts of all. The generally melancholic genius also reveals from time to time the elation depicted above, which characterizes him, and is possible for him alone, an elation which is derived from the spirit's most perfect objectivity, and hovers like a radiance on his high forehead: “in tristitia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis.”⁵

When Schopenhauer here inverts Bruno's chiasmus by starting with melancholy, he weaves it into the topos of the Alpine peaks – the Romantics' cherished image of the birth of the sublime – in a way typical of that period. Melancholy and gloom are the basis, or ground, which Martin Heidegger

5 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, published by Wolfgang von Löhneysen, vol. 2, Darmstadt 1968, p. 494.

would later call the a-byss (*Ab-grund* – literally: without ground); from it, the highest, increasingly rare light is born.

The philosophers of the modern era – with some exceptions – frequent what Georg Lukács mean-spiritedly called *Grand Hotel Abgrund*. And it was simply all too easy for an orthodox Marxist like Lukács, in an increasingly hollow bourgeois culture at the beginning of the 20th century, to find examples of melancholic resignation.⁶ Utopia, especially that which, like Marxism, had a systematic formulation, has had a very difficult time tolerating the gloom of melancholy.

In his study *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Wolf Lepenies has shown not only how the order of utopia has, throughout history, structurally opposed the negative disorder of melancholy and has established law-like prohibitions against it, but also how they have functioned as complementary opposites. The utopian man is often a melancholiac who wants to find a methodical way to free himself from his suffering. He is a Burton – with whom we became acquainted in the previous chapter – who confessed “I write about melancholy, fully occupied with escaping melancholy ...” He wanted to create a new Atlantis with his ideas, and with this utopia, find a remedy for a state that he saw “as a sick body” with such a bad admixture of humors, so weakened by bloodletting, “that nothing other than melancholy remained.”⁷ Or, is he a Campanella, an important forerunner to the modern totalitarian utopia with his *City of the Sun*, where everyone would wear white clothing and feel revulsion against the black color of mourning.⁸

We can see how this fatal connection between collective utopianism and the ban on melancholy is sharpened in the totalitarian states of the present age, such as in National Socialism: “Himmler ruminated: ‘He presumably is bilious and suffering from an illness of the liver. His reports are always bleak, he sees the world with such pessimistic eyes that a physical suffering surely lurks somewhere behind it all. Such psychological effects in people with bile and liver disease are of course well known.’”⁹

6 Lukács’s attack on modern melancholy in art and philosophy, as an expression of bourgeois ideology, is perhaps clearest in *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, Neuwied 1962, *Deutsche Literatur*, Neuwied 1964, and *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus*, Hamburg 1958.

7 Lepenies, p. 23.

8 Ibid. p. 36.

9 Ibid. p. 37.

Modern totalitarianism seeks to clear away evil in the same way that classical medicine sought to drive the dark bodily fluid out of the human organism. Melancholy is destabilizing, a source of concern, as it was for Caesar in his reaction to Cassius in Shakespeare's drama. Melancholy is regarded in the same way by the few artistic trends in this century that had a marked vitalistic or voluntaristic profile. This can be seen in particular in the various, more or less fascistic manifestos of the futurist school. One futurist author was the Italian Marinetti, who thanked his father for his having "the tremendous willpower of a sanguine person, and of a man of power." In 1920, the ideal futurist is described as one who "always acts with happiness, with a view towards tomorrow, without compunction, without pedantry, without false shame, without mysticism, and without melancholy."¹⁰

The battle between utopianism and melancholy, between a compulsory sun cult and an eclipse, permeates the entire history of modernism. And, with the failure of totalitarian utopia, it seems undeniable that the dark lucidity of the melancholiac has emerged the victor. However, in view of the deep connection between these opposing poles, pointed out by Lepenies, this is in no way a simple truth. In the realm of ideas, this complication can be seen perhaps most clearly in two deeply melancholic utopians: Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, who dedicated their efforts to a modern era that they in equal measures detest and love. They are dialecticians who have lost confidence in the reconciliatory power of Hegelian reason, as capital has expanded into all areas of modern society. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno famously inverts Hegel's claim on the truth of the totality and says: "The whole is the untrue." There is no longer any hiding place for reason in a world governed by objectifying exchange values. Reason itself, and its concomitant, traditional emblematics of light, becomes a straitjacket from which a glimpse of freedom can be obtained only by the most subtle transgression: a mythical passage through the world of commodities (Benjamin), or a "negative dialectics" (Adorno), which moves beyond the concept, towards the intentionless.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 40.

¹¹ See 20th Benjamin's "Paris, capitale du XIX^e siècle," in *Das Passagen-Werk*, Frankfurt am Main, 1982, and Adorno's *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main 1966.

Via Hegel and Marx, Adorno and Benjamin have ended up demonizing advanced capitalism as a totalitarian regime, which has made their utopianism just as impotent as it is incomprehensible. In Adorno, the transition to utopia takes place *only* via melancholy, via silence, an *Endgame* like Beckett's.¹² It is only "in hopelessness that one can find hope."¹³ Blackness is held up here as ideal: "today, radical art is the same thing as dark art, with a black background color."¹⁴ Therefore, in neither Benjamin nor Adorno can one find an express desire to banish melancholy, though it is still there, latent in the utopian impulse, in the dialectical fixation on the ruins and dashed hopes of modernity. The melancholiac is veracious just so long as the fettering order lives on. One could say that Benjamin and Adorno offer a negative utopian reformulation of the classical turn that takes melancholy to sublime liberation. Their suspicion of attempts to make this turn explicit generalizes modern melancholy so that it includes all processes aimed at some sort of enlightenment.

It was Nietzsche, who, more clearly than anyone else, saw the connection between the Enlightenment and modern melancholy. "Depression, the pessimistic tone, is a necessary result of the Enlightenment. Even as early as 1770 it could be seen how joy was fading."¹⁵ It is as if light produces its opposite, a "Dialectic of Enlightenment" which is the basis for the program of the Frankfurt School.¹⁶ With the modernists, the light itself is associated with a coercion that shackles one: what the poet Paul Celan called "Lichtzwang."¹⁷

When, in his distrust of the Enlightenment, Adorno takes over modernism's prohibition of the image and critique of language, it also means a suspicion of all attempts to therapeutically or artistically solve the problem of melancholy – hence his very firm repudiation of the psychoanalytic notion of art

¹² See *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, where Beckett is Adorno's prime example.

¹³ *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 261.

¹⁴ *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, "Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884–1885" in KSA 11, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Nördlingen 1988, p. 571. The note, in which Nietzsche believes himself to have come quite a bit longer than Voltaire in the enlightenment of thought, is from the Nachlaß, and concludes as follows: "Perhaps it is I who know best why it is only man that laughs: only he suffers so deeply that he was *forced* to invent laughter. The most unfortunate and most melancholic animal is, quite rightly, the most elated."

¹⁶ See Max Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.

¹⁷ The title of Celan's collection of poetry which came out in 1970.

as a sublimating act. "Artists do not sublimate. That they neither satisfy nor repress their instincts, but instead convert them into socially desirable performances, into artworks, is a psychoanalytic delusion; furthermore, legitimate art today, is, without exception, socially undesirable. On the contrary, artists present a violent, free-flowing instinctual life, characterized by neurosis, in constant collision with reality."¹⁸ And further: "Art is just as inimical to art as the artists are. In denying themselves the goal of their drives, they show a fidelity to that goal that unmasks the socially desirable, something naively extolled by Freud in the name of a sublimation which probably has never existed."¹⁹

Art can never sublimate or transform melancholy into the sublime by means of anything less than a pact with an objectionable reality principle. At its best, the sublime can be enciphered in the name of an absent happiness. Adorno's or Benjamin's position is interesting because it so radically takes the side of modernism and therewith captures its dilemma. Doesn't this mean betraying art – assuming we accept the idea of an epochal melancholy – if we regard it as part of a civilizing process, in the name of a sublimation, or the mirage of reason in the distance?

Let us turn to a contemporary critic with an entirely different sort of optimism: the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who in her book *Soleil noir* has expressed her belief that both these claims are true: modern melancholy is epochal, "the plague of our times," but at the same time it is precisely in melancholy that the sublime is born. "Only sublimation can resist death," she writes, and in this metamorphosis, which she describes in mythological terms as a transformation of Satan into God, of the Fall into the Resurrection, art and beauty have a key role.²⁰ She tries to demonstrate this in a series of close readings of, among others, Nerval, Dostoevsky, and Duras.

The title of Kristeva's book, "The Black Sun," can be seen as the very emblem of modern melancholy. It represents a sort of diabolical alchemy, an attempt to, as Ekelöf puts it, "ring gold from worthlessness,"²¹ which

18 *Minima Moralia*, p. 249.

19 *Ibid.* p. 250.

20 *Soleil noir, Dépression et mélancolie*, Paris 1987, p. 112.

21 Quotation from "Alkemisten" [The Alchemist] in the collection *Non serviam*, 1945.

had been dominant in European poetry since romanticism, (from Nerval, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud) to expressionism and surrealism. The line from classical melancholy to modern ennui, Baudelaire's spleen, was to become the tradition of the rebellious and fallen angels, since the Christianity of the Middle Ages saw ennui as a mortal sin. The melancholiac ended up in Hell, as we can see in Dante.²² Via Milton, Blake, and Byron, the modern melancholiac has a deep kinship with Satanism. In the poetry of Sweden, we see this perhaps most clearly in C. J. L. Almqvist and Ekelöf.²³

Given that the book is written by a psychoanalyst, Kristeva's *Soleil noir* is unusual in its desire to continue certain elements of the classic discourse on melancholy, while, at the same time, her readings also give her theory a critical dimension far beyond the analytical situation.

What, then, does Kristeva's understanding of melancholy look like?

To understand it, we must anticipate the next section on psychoanalysis. Kristeva shares Freud's views on melancholy as an aborted grieving process, where it isn't just the world, but also the self that is impoverished. The melancholiac is an unconscious cannibal, who, internally, has devoured his love object, which he refused to separate himself from. However, Kristeva emphasizes, more than Freud and Karl Abraham (to whom we will return) non-aggressive melancholy, which has no need to exact revenge on the love object which, in turn, by its disappearance betrayed and wounded the "I." Depression is rather "the most archaic expression of a narcissistic wound which cannot be symbolized, cannot be named /.../. For this type of narcissistic, depressed individual, gloominess is, in fact, the only object: more precisely, it is a replacement for the object that it attached itself to, which, lacking another, it domesticates and defends. In this case, suicide is not a camouflaged act of war, but rather a reunification with melancholy and, beyond it, with an impossible love, never reached, always somewhere else. Such are the pledges of nothingness and death."²⁴

²² See Song 3 in *The Divine Comedy*.

²³ It was no coincidence that Ekelöf had Almqvist in mind when he wrote "Djävulspredikan" [Sermon of the Devil] in *Vägvisare till underjorden* [Guide to the Underworld]. See for example Almqvist's *Fernando Bruno*.

²⁴ *Soleil noir*, p. 22.

It is the strength of Kristeva's theory that she at this point – at the risk of weakening the psychoanalytic impulse – manages to incorporate a classical element into melancholy: mirroring. The melancholiac is a wounded Narcissus, who is bound to his suffering. In his infinite loss, he is a godforsaken skeptic, an atheist, who at the same time is so emotionally bound to his loss that he, like a mystic, has a passion for Death and elevates Nothingness.

Here Kristeva stands in relation to a broad literary tradition. We see it in Shakespeare. In Petrarch, the sweet gloominess is even more evident. "So it is. And what's more, I sense a false sweetness in everything from which I suffer. For me, this sad psychic condition is a swarm of pain, misery, and fear, an unencumbered path into despair ... And the height of the misery is that I, with a certain calm sensual pleasure, devote myself to my tears and hardship, and only reluctantly tear myself away from them."²⁵

This process of the melancholic deriving pleasure in his reflecting on himself in his predicament is something Starobinski has studied in some detail in Baudelaire.²⁶ Victor Hugo declaimed "Melancholy, it is the joy of being sad."²⁷ This ambivalence can be found everywhere. It seems to be a universal feature of poetic gloom.

But Kristeva approaches this relationship also from a linguistic perspective. The suffering Narcissus prefers silence: "Distrustful of language, the depressed person is an emotional person, certainly wounded, but attached to his affect. The affect is his concern."²⁸ It is in this analysis of the melancholiac's paradoxical relation to language that Kristeva both continues the classic theme of the creative potential of darkness – "Night is the mother of day" (Erik Johan Stagnelius) – and binds her theory of melancholy to a specifically modern kind of text.

What does the language of the melancholiac look like, *before* the therapeutic or artistic transformation has taken place?

Kristeva talks about monotony and the repetition of the same formulas. She points to the inability to link words together into whole sentences and

²⁵ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca, a cura di Antonietta Bufano*, vol. 1, Turin 1975, p. 140f.

²⁶ Starobinski, *La mélancolie au miroir, Trois lectures de Baudelaire*, Paris 1989.

²⁷ Hugo, *Romans*, published by Henri Guillemin, vol. 3, Paris 1963, p. 151.

²⁸ *Soleil noir*, p. 24.

the resulting silence, ellipses, and dissolution of syntax. She calls attention to slowness and inactivity as characteristic of lugubriousness.

But if this estrangement in language is the actual starting point, this “asymbolie” must also shine through in melancholy’s liberating language. For it is not just any symbolization that can master the unnamable suffering, only the “translation” which, like poetry, is sensitive to the wordless, affective Thing with which the melancholiac is filled, can do this. Here Kristeva discusses three different sublimating techniques:

Use of prosody. The part of the theory of sound that deals with the quantity, intensity, tonality, and sonority of the sounds in language acquires a particular significance when the logical structure of language proves insufficient; in this “language beyond the language,” Kristeva stresses the particular importance of rhythm and alliteration.

Use of the characters’ polyvalence. This represents a linguistic multiplicity of values, which, in contrast to unequivocal naming, brings together a swarm of connotations around the individual word, and thereby opens up a path to the melancholiac’s closed, inner space.

Use of the excuse. An act which, according to Kristeva, changes the psychic economy by relieving the melancholiac of his debt burden, which is linked to the unconscious desire for revenge against the lost object.²⁹

In both of the first two cases, one can see a way out of suffering for art. The third seems to us to be more problematic: in his creative undertakings, the artist hardly apologizes.³⁰

But Kristeva also mentions something else, something that goes hand in hand with the melancholiac’s loss of words, and that highlights the modernist aspect of her conception. In the same way that the melancholic person lost contact with his origin – the mother’s body – he has also lost his native language. He must invent a new language within language, in Mallarmé’s formulation, which Kristeva quotes: “a total word, new, foreign in language.”³¹

²⁹ Ibid. p. 109.

³⁰ Kristeva actually believes that the excuse can play a fundamental role in literature. See her analysis of Dostoevsky in *ibid.*, p. 223f.

³¹ Ibid. p. 54.

Kristeva gives different descriptions of this estrangement. “The words of the depressive are a mask – a beautiful facade dressed in a foreign language.”³² At the same time, there is often a depth spoken by the melancholiac, beyond the hollow meaning of the phrase: the voice itself “preserves a strong and varied feeling hidden in the intonation.”³³ Hence the significance of prosody.

Despite Kristeva’s rich presentation, one wonders how compatible the clinical perspective is with the critical. To what extent can we consider the creation of art as analogous to the therapeutic process? To what extent is the concept of sublimation at all applicable to art? To what extent is modern art – melancholic art – a relief from suffering? That Nerval, who wrote in the spirit of the extinguished star, increasingly slid into madness, is hardly a sign that his writing had a therapeutic effect – not even, as Kristeva puts it, a “provisionally” therapeutic effect.³⁴ We need not register the often incomprehensible happiness of writing as something healthy. Often, it is actually a happiness that goes beyond the very limits of that which is considered healthy or reasonable.

Despite Kristeva’s great sensitivity to the speechless, black hole of melancholy, which requires an exceedingly subtle translation, she ends up with an idealization of art as medicinal, which means an impoverishment of its very claims and hopes. The melancholy beauty of art becomes an ornament, while Kristeva maintains that art through history is marked by “a real and imaginary effectiveness,” a purifying “catharsis,” a “therapeutic method.”³⁵

In this way, Kristeva’s model becomes part of the classic civilizing program of psychoanalysis, where the path goes from the darkness to the light, from unconscious compulsion to conscious enlightenment. Even if we can not accept this optimistic view of the artistic process, Freudian theory – in the context of a therapeutic, effective enlightenment, a sun of reason beyond the eclipse – manages to catch sight of much that is forgotten and repressed in the earliest history of humanity.



³² Ibid. p. 66.

³³ Ibid. p. 66.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 181.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 35.

IV.

The Melancholiac as Cannibal

Psychoanalysis at the Crossroads

We saw how, in modernity, melancholy was set loose from the three other humors and temperaments, and developed a normative status for the literature and philosophy of the epoch. Julia Kristeva goes so far as to claim there is a specifically melancholic text, not only as far as themes and historical roots are concerned, but also with regard to linguistic construction – a type of text that inspires and beseeches, one rich with multiple meaning, one that, on an advanced level, would be characteristic not just of melancholy, but also of modernism. In addition, the distinctive feature of the psychoanalytic understanding of melancholy is not Kristeva's historical and aesthetic reflections, but a relatively narrow scientism with a limited time frame, where a dialogue with the ideas of the classical tradition is avoided. In orthodox psychoanalysis, one looks in vain for classical sources and motives. This has meant that the creative potential of melancholy has been staunched, and it has become a clinical concept, on equal footing with depression. With that it has been incorporated into the master discourse of psychoanalysis.

Despite this, it is precisely psychoanalysis that has most rigorously connected the two poles in this essay, melancholy and cannibalism, and has done so in the context of a broader theory of culture. What establishes this connection is not simply Freud's groundbreaking essay "Trauer und Melancholie," from 1915, but, it would seem, a unified psychoanalytic movement.

¹ Peter Sloterdijk has pointedly captured the cynical element in the power position occupied by the psychoanalyst, as the inheritor of the Enlightenment tradition of uncovering. See *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main 1983, pp. 76ff. and 107ff.

We saw in the previous section how Julia Kristeva also concurred with the psychoanalytic thesis that *unconsciously*, the *melancholiac is a cannibal*. How should this peculiar statement be understood?

Let us first briefly look at the case of Hélène, as Kristeva presents it in the chapter “La solitude cannibalique” in *Soleil noir*.² Hélène is presented here as a depressive patient, who, like a “blind Proserpina,” seems to live in the realm of death. She shuns her own mirror image, and her body is absent, like “a living cadaver.” She has, like so many melancholiacs, a disturbed relationship to her mother, whom she describes as a self-obsessed and callous nymphomaniac. Hélène recounts a dream where she is sitting with “someone who is carrying her, perhaps in her (her mother’s) lap, but in reality, it is no one. A person should have a face, a voice, eyes, a head. But I see nothing like this, only support, that is all, nothing else.”

Hélène is asked whether she perhaps has incorporated her mother and thereby become one with her. Then she recounts a dream where she goes up a flight of stairs “full of bodies that resembled people in the photo from my parents’ wedding. I myself am invited to the wedding, it is a meal for cannibals, I have to eat these bodies, these body parts, the heads, also my mother’s head. It was horrifying.”

Kristeva’s interpretation of this case is that Hélène has incorporated, has swallowed, the absent mother, and carries her with her in her body as a phantasm, which she does everything possible to suppress and keep in check. But how does psychoanalysis explain the possibility of carrying out this “cannibalistic” act in the first place?

It is instructive to begin here with an undeservedly little discussed predecessor, the first true psychoanalyst in Germany, Karl Abraham (1877–1925). Very early on, with more detail than Freud, he outlines the relationship between melancholy and an almost primordial kind of eating that has been repressed. Abraham’s most original contribution to psychoanalysis centers on precisely the oral stage and its connection to various disturbances of the psyche.³

² The case of Hélène is discussed in *Soleil noir* under the heading “La solitude cannibalique” pp. 83–90.

³ The works in question: “Untersuchungen über die früheste prägenitale Entwicklungsstufe der Libido” from 1916 and “Versuch einer Entwicklungsgeschichte der Libido auf Grund der Psychoanalyse seelischer Störungen” from 1924.

Abraham argues for the theory that the melancholiac has an oral fixation and carries a sense of shame for his “cannibalistic” impulse, which manifests itself in self-punishment, a mysticism of suffering, and self-starvation. The hatred is directed primarily against the mother, in a sort of inverted Oedipus Complex, which is why the melancholiac has problems distinguishing between oral and genital, between eating and loving. Abraham’s first central work on the oral stage, from 1916, is a deepening of Freud’s *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, the third edition of which, from 1915, describes the oral stage as “cannibalistic” for the first time. “A first such pre-genital sexual organization is *oral* or, if you will, *cannibalistic*.” Its most important feature, writes Freud, is that “here, sexual activity is not yet divorced from intake of nourishment, its internal oppositions not yet distinguished. The object of the former activity is the same as for the latter, the sexual objective is the incorporation of the object, the pattern for what later, in the form of *identification*, will play such an important role in the psyche.”⁴

Here, as elsewhere, there is a very strong agreement between Abraham and Freud.⁵ Abraham is following not only Freud when he calls the oral stage “cannibalistic” and describes its sexual goal as an incorporation (*Einverleibung*) of the object.⁶ As Abraham shows in one of his detailed case histories, the very word “cannibalism” can itself be the patient’s own. The person in question expresses an extreme desire for milk, and his behavior manifests many similarities to the behavior of an infant: his representation, or image, of the greatest of pleasures was sucking, and, at a later stage, eating the beloved.

“He said that when he was a little boy he had had the idea that loving somebody was exactly the same as the idea of eating something good. Since childhood he had had ‘cannibalistic ideas.’ These ideas were at first traced back along associative paths to his fourth year. At this age /.../ he had had a nurse to whom he had been very much attached. It was she who was the centre of his cannibalistic fantasies. At a later period the patient still often

4 Freud, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, Frankfurt am Main 1977 (1905), p. 70.

5 Until Abraham’s death, Freud and Abraham worked together extremely closely during the time when psychoanalysis was being established. See the comprehensive correspondence, *Briefe 1907–1926*, published by Hilda C. Abraham and Ernst L. Freud, Frankfurt am Main 1980.

6 *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*, transl. B. Strachey, London 1954, p. 251.

used to want to bite into her, and 'swallow her, skin, hair, clothes, and all.'"⁷

Abraham summarizes the case in three points. We find here a person in a state of great confusion, a person for whom the oral zone is more important than other erogenous zones. Secondly, sexuality and the ingestion of food are joined or mixed together. Thirdly, he has a desire to incorporate the object that he had become attached to.

At the end of the essay, Abraham discusses the correlation between such an oral fixation and depressives, who often surrender themselves to a conscious and demonstratively displayed refusal to eat. But in depression, a regressive transformation of the libido takes place. "[I]n these patients the libido has regressed to the most primitive stage of its development known to us, to that stage which we have come to know as the oral or the cannibalistic stage."⁸ Even less seriously ill melancholiacs will unconsciously seek to engulf and obliterate the object. Unlike the obsessional neurotic, they eliminate the love object by *engulfing* it. And unlike the paranoiac, they incorporate the object not only to a certain extent, but *in its entirety*.

These cannibalistic dreams are active in one kind of depressive madness in particular, a formerly widespread, and still occasionally occurring idea of a person's transformation into a wild, man-eating *werewolf*. A self-punishing imagination with roots in ancient rites and mythology, to which we shall return, and which, in early Greek medicine went under the name *lycanthropy*.⁹

In a similar way, the melancholiac often accuses himself of having committed crimes which in reality he could not have committed. Here, we find the explanation in a cannibalistic violation of the incest taboo. "If we assume that the deepest repressed wishes of the melancholic are of a cannibalistic nature, that his 'sins' in essence refer to a forbidden, even detested, act of eating, then we understand the great frequency with which he refuses to take food"¹⁰ A refusal to eat is the punishment for, and the repression of, this fantasy: "he threatens himself with that punishment which is alone fitting for his unconscious cannibalistic impulses: death by starvation."¹¹

⁷ Ibid. p. 257.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 276–277.

⁹ See the chapter, "The Sacrifice," below, p. 120.

¹⁰ Abraham, p. 278.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 278.

For Abraham, as for Freud, there is an exact correspondence between individual and human development, between ontogeny and phylogeny. They take over Haeckel's law of development, which says that the growth of the individual is a repetition of the development of the genus. He thus concludes his study by noting that the horror of eating one's own offspring, which can be found in many legends, is an expression of that "early cannibalistic stage in the development of the libido. This phase of the individual instinctual life corresponds exactly to the cannibalistic stage of civilization..."¹²

With this study, Abraham has sketched in its essentials the contours of his multidimensional and empirically anchored theory of melancholy. He did this before he was able to read Freud's groundbreaking essay "Trauer und Melancholie," which was published the following year, though it had been written in 1915. Freud's and Abraham's theories are thus parallel, and it was because of the war that the publication of *Trauer* was delayed. Because of the nimbus and power of Freud's essay, Abraham's effort ended up in the background. But it is Abraham who, in a letter written on March 31, 1915, made Freud aware of the relationship between the melancholiac's self-starvation and the fixation at the oral stage of libido development.¹³

The agreement here between Freud and Abraham is so great that Abraham's other major work, from 1924, resembles a well-documented deepening of Freud's brief exposition in "Trauer und Melancholie." He works out the idea

¹² Ibid. p. 279.

¹³ In this letter, Abraham writes: "... the child wants to *incorporate* a love object, in short: *eat it*. I see now that there are very valid reasons to believe in such a cannibalistic tendency in melancholic identification /.../ As a first argument, I would like to cite the melancholiac's anxiety about starving to death. Eating has taken the place of love. I would assume that the role assigned to the anal zone in obsessional neurosis is the same as that assigned to the mouth in melancholia /.../ Another primary symptom is a *refusal to eat*; in other, calmer, and more long-lasting chronic cases, eating takes on an exaggerated importance in a positive sense.

Of interest is also the classic form of depressive delusions from times past, which was referred to as *Lykantropi*. This is the belief that one is a werewolf and has consumed human beings!" *Briefe*, p. 208f.

Maria Torok, an important contemporary French psychoanalyst, has pointed out how oddly absent-minded and nonchalant Freud seems when these subjects are raised in their correspondence a few years later. Perhaps his need for sovereignty couldn't abide the fact that Abraham had, on several points, gone further than he himself had managed to. See Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, *L'Écorce et le noyau*, Paris 1987, p. 229ff.

that the melancholiac, in his return to the oral stage, uses the incorporation of the lost love object in order to maintain it in an ambivalent identification. The melancholiac can not, or – as someone in a state of mourning – does not want to, accept the loss, but instead incorporates the lost object to preserve it permanently.

In the essay, Freud speaks of a narcissistic identification, but this act of identification takes place so early that it precedes the actual object choice; the “I” essentially “would like to incorporate this object, and, more specifically, in line with the oral or cannibalistic stage, it would like to do so by consuming it (*auf dem Wege des Fressens*).” It is a special identification that “behaves like a descendant of the oral stage,” and which is thus not as controlled by representations and ideals as that which we usually call identification.¹⁴

On one important point, Abraham corrected his theory in a Freudian direction in the later study. The supposed self-indictment of the melancholiac – the werewolf’s “self-punishing fantasies” – is in fact directed against the incorporated love object, as Freud described it in “Trauer und Melancholie.” The love for the object moves, via narcissistic identification, into the “I,” while the feeling of having been abandoned, violated, and wounded, is acted out in a sort of an inverted revenge against the lost object. This is how Freud can explain the melancholiac’s need to torment himself, his sweet pain, and his suicidal tendencies.¹⁵

Abraham writes that even if there are great similarities between the obsessional neurotic and the melancholiac in that both clearly involve pregenital disturbances and show a marked ambivalence in their divergence as far as order, ideals, and money are concerned – which signals a common fixation at the anal or anal-sadistic stage – the melancholiac is characterized by having completely given up his relation to the love object. According to Abraham, the difference exists because the anal-sadistic stage contains contradictory elements that psychoanalysis previously had not kept separate. The sadist and the anal-erotic have dualistic tendencies. They enjoy both retaining and possessing, as well as repelling, or emptying themselves. But in

14 *Studienausgabe*, vol. III, Frankfurt am Main 1975, p. 203.

15 *Ibid.* p. 206.

the obsessional neurotic, it is the former tendency, the tendency to preserve, that is the strongest; in the melancholiac, it is the latter destructive tendency that is strongest. The former wants (deliberately), for example, to make the object his property, the latter wants to sever the link with it even if he (unconsciously) incorporates it. In an extension of this logic, Abraham sketches a more detailed model of development than the one Freud presented in *Drei Abhandlungen*.¹⁶

The melancholiac regresses further than the obsessional neurotic, who remains fixed at a later, more object-oriented stage. The regression drifts between anal destruction of the object and oral eating. He tries to show this by means of a couple of very interesting case histories. He presents two cases of female depression that involve the beginnings of the earliest stages. What's at stake is an *oral sadism*, in which the person in question tried, in her unconscious fantasy, to become one with her father through the biting off / castrating / swallowing his penis after the father had died and abandoned the child. Both cases show tendencies towards kleptomania and compulsive depressiveness. They want both to harm the lost love object and incorporate it, even though the latter also wants to free herself from it by hysterically vomiting it out. The severe period of sickness is characterized by a destructive, cannibalistic drive, while the period of recovery breaks the binding process and makes possible a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The patient succeeds in communicating her fantasies about eating parts of the object.

Abraham gives other examples as well: "The patient just referred to once said that he would like to 'eat up' the young girl in question (whom he identified with his mother) 'mouthful by mouthful.'" ¹⁷

Abraham has made many observations about the differences among melancholy, paranoia, and obsessional neuroses that involve the distinction between oral and anal incorporation and expulsion. In paranoia, the incorporation is anal, in melancholy, as we have seen, it is oral.

Throughout, he bases his ideas on anthropological material, in particular Geza R  heim's studies on patricide and necrophagy in primitive cultures.

¹⁶ *Selected Papers*, p. 496.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 487.

He wants to interpret this as confirmation of the connection between anal destruction and oral incorporation that he was able to observe in his own deeply depressed patients; “the patient’s desire to eat excrement is a cannibalistic impulse to devour the love-object that he has killed.”¹⁸

Abraham summarizes his ideas by saying that the melancholiac has a tendency to abandon the love object, which has its roots in an early anal-sadistic stage, while he at the same time slips down into an even earlier, oral behavior, where sucking and biting are highly erotically charged.¹⁹

More emphatically than Freud, Abraham stresses the disturbed relationship with the mother as the basis of clinical melancholia.



But to return to the classical understanding of melancholy, how compatible is Abraham’s theory with the idea of the creative impulse of genius?

In point of fact, Abraham has not neglected this aspect, although he avoided making classical references. He has written what is perhaps the first major study of an artist’s personality and work from a psychoanalytic standpoint, which can be seen as an early application of his concept of melancholia. The study is devoted to the Swiss visual artist Giovanni Segantini, and came out in 1911.²⁰

In what way does this insightful essay on Segantini’s art complete the clinical perspective on melancholia?

Segantini is without a doubt a perfect example of a regressive melancholiac, one who gives expression to an early bond with the mother that was later broken or violated. At the age of five, he loses his mother as a result, ultimately, of his own difficult birth, and, shortly thereafter, his father abandons

18 Ibid. p. 444.

19 Ibid. p. 448.

20 The study is called *Giovanni Segantini*, and has the subtitle “a psychoanalytic study.” It was published in 1911 and, for the following reasons, was developed further in 1924: “In recent years I have made a particular study of depressive states, and I believe I can now contribute to our further understanding of Segantini’s melancholic tendencies.” (From Preface to the Second Edition.) It is this second edition we have used here in our essay. It is found in *Clinical Papers and Essays on Psychoanalysis* by Karl Abraham, London 1955.

him. All of his artistic production is permeated by a melancholic cult of the mother, nature, and death.

Why doesn't the neurotic Segantini go crazy, like Abraham's more difficult cases?

We find a suggestion of an answer in Abraham's discussion of the remarkable turning point in Segantini's work in 1886, which is reminiscent of melancholy's sudden reversal into triumphant mania. Segantini now leaves his Romantic cult of suffering, where he felt like a passive interpreter of nature, and is pervaded by a feeling of sublime power. This can be seen in his relation to the sun, which is no longer eclipsed, but which he now wants to take possession of. Abraham interprets this to mean that Segantini herewith succeeds in expressing his restrained aggressiveness, which, together with a marked femininity, resulted in his accepting a form of sexual suffering for a very long time. As a result of this change, his painting was also transformed in a comprehensive way.

Abraham does not, however, succeed in explaining this crucial metamorphosis in any other way than that Segantini was from the start in possession of a very strong impulse to sublimate, which now, in a way that seems miraculous, achieves its full power. Segantini succeeds in artistically representing the suppressed sadism and violence inherent in the image of the mother which previously had been encapsulated in the "I." In his powerful new paintings, he expresses, unconsciously, a revenge against the mother who left him. This is particularly true of his paintings from the so-called Nirvana Period, 1890–1893, which were met with utter incomprehension when they first appeared. What's surprising is that these works, perhaps Segantini's most striking – such as the Buddhist-inspired *The Hell of the Sensual*, with two women floating in the air in front of a majestic background of snow-covered alpine peaks – receive a persuasive psychoanalytic deciphering even though Abraham nonetheless shares the period's lack of understanding for the artistic value of the works. Segantini's relief from his melancholic suffering takes place at the expense of the reality principle. In order to symbolize and express his innermost thoughts and feelings he has to invent a language that is incomprehensible to the viewer, and can't be enjoyed by him.²¹

On the one hand, as an analyst, Abraham says that Segantini succeeds in an unprecedented way in giving expression to the fundamental conflict at the center of his soul, while at the same time, as an observer of art, he resolutely adopts the stance of the reality principle and declares the paintings to be too subjective and divorced from reality. What is comprehensible from the former point of view is incomprehensible from the latter.²¹

Here the psychoanalyst is, as is so often the case, caught in a double bind, which means that he requires symbolization; yet in the name of the reality principle, which vouches for health and the redress of imbalance, he cannot permit a symbolization that all too tangibly – as in modernist art – conflicts with a “normal” discourse suited to reality. The dual message – “symbolize” but “don’t symbolize too much” – seems unavoidable in both the idea of art qua sublimation as well as in any attempt at a strict division between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, between a critical-artistic perspective, and a clinical perspective.

One way to develop psychoanalysis here is to consider melancholy as a language, or, at least, as a condition that very much tends to bring forth language. In this way, we would start – from a new angle – moving towards a classical understanding of melancholy.

In her studies, Kristeva has constantly stressed melancholy’s transformation into linguistic triumph. Melancholy tends to sublate itself, as in the case of Segantini, when the melancholiac succeeds in symbolizing his internal impulses. She has observed this in Baudelaire, but also in a writer such as Proust, where we find “a constant oscillation between melancholy and joy.” This oscillation is inseparable from the act of creation, since art itself is happiness.²²

21 Abraham writes: “The more a man turns away from reality, and replaces the real world by phantasy-fulfilment of his repressed wishes, the more incomprehensible he becomes. His work fails to evoke in us any sympathetic response. This is what happened to Segantini.” *Clinical Papers*, p. 243.

22 “Symbolism is both revealing and concealing ... The veiled language of the Nirvana pictures indicates that Segantini’s deepest complexes demanded some kind of expression, and that the artist yielded to this urge, but that the power of repression was effective enough to conceal the deepest meaning of his pictures.” Ibid. p. 243.

23 Mona Vincent, “Text som erfarenhet och minne, Samtal med Julia Kristeva om Marcel Prousts *På spaning efter den tid som flytt*” [Text as Experience and Memory: Discussion with Julia Kristeva on Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*], in the journal *Divan*, nr. 4.

But in another respect as well, Kristeva has followed and developed a psychoanalytic perspective by emphasizing the importance of the dead mother for Proust. We find in *In Search of Lost Time* both a cult of the mother, “which also runs through the image of the petite madeleine,” and a profaning of the mother “that is not explicitly visible in *In Search* other than as a transference onto another person in the work.” We find the classical psychoanalytic idea of the melancholiac’s fixation at the level of a primary cannibalism, which in Proust is sublimated to the other food which we can perceive at many key points in his text. This is how Kristeva seeks to understand the petite madeleine as a Host, the bread of the Holy Communion. It is a transubstantiation which Proust also touches upon in his correspondence. “He sees the possibility of allowing the body to pass over into the text.”²⁴

But there is also another way to carry the psychoanalytic theory of melancholy further, which is visible in the thought of Jacques Derrida.

The important link between Freud and Derrida is the Hungarian analysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who sought to develop the ideas of their countryman, Sándor Ferenczi. Let us restrict ourselves here to the important distinction between mourning and melancholy that Freud presents in *Trauer*, and the possible conclusions that can be drawn from it.

The difference between mourning and melancholy in Freud may seem unclear, since in both cases he speaks of an inner “work” that is done, that serves the same goal, namely, to cut the libidinous ties with the lost object. Both the person grieving and the melancholiac work through the loss in order to eliminate it, *by* eliminating it.²⁵

Nonetheless, there is a difference, and it is decisive. The work of mourning actually leads, in favorable cases, to the realization that the loss is a fact, whereas the melancholiac, by incorporating the lost or dead love object, refuses to recognize the loss. What is fatal in the melancholiac’s situation is thus that he can get rid of the loss of the object only by doing away with himself. Since the object is part of him, he can only attack and disparage it by suffering himself.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Freud compares the work of mourning with “the work of melancholy” in *Studienausgabe*, vol. III, p. 209.

But how should the melancholiac's astonishing, cannibalistic solution really be understood? Why does Freud also speak here about a "work" that is done, when the melancholiac is obviously unsuccessful in his efforts to get rid of the loss? Indeed, he seems instead to try to take care of and protect within himself the person he has lost, precisely in the form of denial and depression.

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok – and later, Derrida – construct a large part of their version of psychoanalysis on the basis of this distinction between mourning and melancholy. But they make it even more radical by further stressing the cannibalistic act. This act is performed when mourning – which is mediated and otherwise effective – fails, which is usually the result of an early disruption of the relation to the mother. The melancholiac eats the lost object without digesting his food. He incorporates the object forcibly, magically, without mediation, and makes use of a phantasm that binds the deceased to the "I."²⁶

It is a strange operation, given that it coincides with the formation of a space in the "I" that is both inside and outside it. The one that was lost, the deceased, is undoubtedly, incorporated in the "I," and at the same time beyond all naming or contact. If the mourner speaks and expresses his suffering, the melancholiac is silent. The melancholiac broods over the loss as over an internal burial ground. It is a place maintained in silence, in secret, which the reality principle – and thus language – cannot reach, and Torok and Abraham have aptly named it a *crypt*, which naturally carries over into talk about the linguistic *encryptions* that both hide and perpetuate the internal space.²⁷

The crypt cannot be analyzed as something unconscious in the traditional sense. The "I" of the melancholiac is dirempted and consists partly of this isolated, quiet crypt, but also of a different part, which no doubt speaks,

²⁶ See Derrida's introduction "Fors" to Abraham and Torok's *Cryptonomie, Le verbiage de l'homme aux loups*, Paris 1967, p. 17ff. The difference between mourning and melancholy, introjecting and incorporating, is explained by Abraham and Torok in several articles, including "Deuil ou mélancolie" in *L'écorce et le noyau*.

²⁷ The crypt and the operation of encryption is dealt with most exhaustively in *Cryptonomie*. In Derrida, discussions of the idea of the crypt recur in his entire oeuvre, not least in the book on Paul Celan, *Schibboleth*.

and which established a pact with the former part. The “I” tends to his inner cave with an inverted Freudian strategy; it is as if it said “Wo ich war soll Es werden.” It is not the unconscious, the “It,” that will become a part of the enlightened “I,” as was Freud’s view, but quite the contrary. The “I” has – forever, it would seem – placed itself in the shadow of the eclipsed sun.²⁸

It is important to point out that the formation of this inner crypt is not simply limited to melancholy’s misfortune; it has a far broader significance.²⁹ In Derrida, this leads to a radicalization of the key theoretical issues of psychoanalysis in the direction of a general theory of writing,³⁰ with the same objective as his previous analysis of Freud’s idea of the memory-trace as something rooted in a primal scene of writing beyond the conscious “I.”³¹

Derrida’s question is precisely this: “What is a crypt?” and his entire argument seeks to show how a primordial distinction, a dynamic “writing,” is the basis for both the mediating work with loss done by the mourner as well as for the melancholiac’s or paranoiac’s magical incorporation of the object. Here, he alludes to Heraclitus’ claim that being, *physis*, loves to hide itself, *kryptein*, and devotes a large part of the essay to formulating a modern form of hermetism.

We saw that the crypt isn’t something unconscious in the traditional sense, but rather, says Derrida, a “false unconscious” that is grafted onto the dirempted “I.” This encoding or encryption is a violent occurrence that itself precedes the interpretations that the “I” itself makes of its situation. It is actually the resistance to any interpretive claim and any translatability that makes this category of patients so extraordinarily difficult to treat. Language exists in order to conceal, and in this, it is inseparable from the inner crypt. This is not a hermeneutic interpretative praxis but rather a kind of hermetism, writes Derrida.³²

Psychoanalytic research into melancholy has time after time pointed to an early disturbance in the relationship to the mother as an oft-seen precondition for the development of melancholy. In a way different from Freud’s

28 For Derrida’s comment on this inversion of Freud’s dictum, see *Cryptonomie*, p. 23f.

29 The actual object of study for the theory of the crypt, the Wolf Man, was not taken to be a melancholiac but rather a paranoiac.

30 See “Fors” in *Cryptonomie*.

31 This is found in the essay “La scène de l’écriture” in *L’écriture et la différence* from 1967.

32 *Cryptonomie*, p. 13.

analysis – though more in line with Karl Abraham – later analysts such as Melanie Klein have drawn attention to the importance of the mother's breast and the acceptance and desire for the first food, or the rejection of it. It is in that tradition, via his own psychoanalysts, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, that Derrida writes.

But what sort of relationship does the mourner have to the first food? We saw how mourning is an effective, linguistic working through of the loss. Torok and Abraham believe that the mourner manages to replace the first nourishment with functioning symbols and expressions. The empty mouth is filled with metaphoric food, which can be shared with others. Conversely, the melancholiac *realizes* the metaphor and incorporates it into the body as an indigestible “word thing,” Derrida writes, “but he eats it (by mouth or otherwise) not to introject it, but, one might say, to vomit it into the interior, into the interior of a cyst. The metaphor is ‘taken at its word’ in order to resist its introjective and, I would add, always idealizing effectiveness.”³³

For Derrida there are metaphysical implications of the distinction between the introjection of mourning, eating-in-order-to-digest, and incorporation of melancholy, eating / vomiting-in-order-to-preserve. The effective shared eating of mourning, its reality-adjusted “work,” eliminates the loss only at the price of a constant tendency to idealize. The mourner successfully replaces the lost object metaphorically, and this replacement, this compensation is, as is so often the case, a translation into the higher realms of idealism, a conferring of spirituality, of eternal life, etc. to the dead, but also a valuation – very characteristic of our culture – of the organ that successfully performed the feat of transforming a loss into insight, empty speech into full speech: that is, the mouth.³⁴

If the melancholiac is characterized by an oral *fixation*, which we have previously seen, one could say that the mourner tends towards an oral *idealization*. Derrida speaks here of the mouth's *paradigmatic* role in the work of mourning, but it can take on this role only because it first was silent and never entirely ceases to be silent. The “happiness” of the mourner is the

³³ Ibid. p. 56.

³⁴ Here, the difference between Derrida's understanding of psychoanalysis and Jacques Lacan's is striking. Lacan frequently emphasizes “full speech,” “la parole pleine,” as the goal of analysis.

ability to use words to fill the empty mouth after the disappearance of the mother and her breast, whereas the melancholiac never quite finds that other food. He must instead invent it in his creative activity, but it will always contain a remainder of something unnamable and, fundamentally, inedible.

In line with his clinical perspective and interest in remedying and eliminating the pathological, Freud has emphasized the idealizing force of mourning, just as he, like so many who came after him, has stressed the therapeutic effect of art as an act of sublimation. Freud speaks of both mourning and melancholy as a kind of “working through.” This is an idealized way of expressing it since it means that the mourning is, “normally,” effective and succeeds in dealing with the loss. As in Hegel, death becomes a kind of work that effaces itself in the self-appropriation of the subject or Spirit.³⁵

But is it ever possible to overcome and deal with the loss entirely? Isn't the melancholiac's strategy here more “veracious,” an expression of a “more true” mourning, precisely because he refuses to speak or think away the fact of death?

An unquestionably melancholic side of Derrida's thought can be seen when he says that all language and thinking is already encrypted from the very beginning. It contains an inarticulable remainder, a trace of a loss that has been impossible to assimilate completely. The difference between mourning and melancholy is ultimately a difference between speaking and remaining silent, eating and starving, indeed, between Eros and Thanatos, who are at work within us before a first “beginning” is even possible to imagine. Derrida's critique of all metaphysics of life must be seen in light of this inversion and radicalization of Freud.³⁶

But this criticism does not just mean that we can not entirely do away with a real loss, deeply linked to the separation from the mother. The loss goes even deeper: the very medium of the “work” by means of which we, in

35 See below, in the chapter, “Speculative Communion,” for a discussion of Hegel's all-encompassing and anti-melancholic view of thinking as an eating-in-order-to-digest.

36 The transgression of a traditional metaphysics of life becomes clear in Derrida in his reading of Husserl in *La voix et le phénomène*, Vendôme 1983. Cf. also Derrida's analysis of the death drive in his reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in “Spéculer – sur ‘Freud,’” *La carte postale*, Paris 1980. The relation of melancholy to the death drive is an issue that would require at least a chapter of its own.

our mourning, imagine ourselves able to overcome the loss *itself* has a flip side, something indigestible. The medium is language, and language has an exterior, a letter that can never quite be broken down in our efforts to understand.

In his emphasis on the effectiveness of mourning in the name of the reality principle, Freud has paradoxically made himself the spokesman for an idealism that amounts to an exclusion of all exteriority – be it death, the other, or language in the form of writing.

The remainder is not just a remnant or relic, like a scar, from the past. In Derrida, it is something we unceasingly produce – far beyond the context of the Freudian clinic.

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V. Liberating Mania

Samuel Beckett and Thomas Bernhard

I am not one of those who risk changing the melody.
Samuel Beckett

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault outlines the development of the medical complex that goes under the name of *manic-depression*. To treat manic activity and depressive gloominess as two sides of one and the same pathological disposition was by no means obvious for classic humoral pathology. It is only with the 17th century British doctor Thomas Willis that we find for the first time what Foucault called a “mania-melancholia alteration,” that is, the idea of a continuity between depression and mania: “After melancholia, we must consider mania, with which it has so many affinities that these complaints often change into one another.”¹ Mania came to be regarded as an extreme form of melancholy, a condition in which unobtrusive gloominess degenerated into pure madness. To pass over this boundary, is, according to Willis, to move from the smoke straight into the fire: “If we can say that in melancholia, the brain and the animal spirits are obscured by smoke and a dense vapor, mania seems to ignite a kind of conflagration hitherto muffled by them.”²

Mania is thus nothing but melancholy driven to its most radical extreme. Foucault summarizes Willis’s discovery:

1 Willis, cited in Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, 2001, p. 124.

2 Ibid. p. 125.

[I]t happens, in fact, that the melancholic predisposition, if aggravated, becomes frenzy; frenzy, on the contrary, when it decreases and loses its force, finally grows calm and turns to melancholic diathesis. A rigorous empiricism would see two related diseases here, or even two successive symptoms of the same disease. However, Willis does not pose the problem in terms of symptoms nor in terms of disease; he merely seeks the link connecting two states in the dynamics of animal spirits. In the melancholic, we remember, the spirits were somber and dim; they cast their shadows over the images of things and formed a kind of dark tide; in the maniac, on the contrary, the spirits seethed in a perpetual ferment; they were carried by an irregular movement, constantly repeated; a movement that eroded and consumed, and even without fever, sent out its heat.³

Foucault sees here the basis of the vision of melancholy and mania that persists even up through Freud: that depressive passivity can turn into manic activity. But this transformation is still taking place within the same pathological structure – mania doesn't mean liberation from introverted mournfulness, but rather an illusory triumph over mourning. Unlike the real work of mourning, which is able to process the loss and pain through sublimation and idealization, mania is a denial of grief that will never lead to real recovery. The internal pain is turned into hatred against the outside world, it is transformed into a manic destructive drive, but the grief over the loss of the love object is never overcome.⁴

The psychoanalytic view of mania is entirely negative – mania is a pathological form of activity that is unable to act out real conflicts; on the contrary, it means an aggravation of the condition. Julia Kristeva is faithful to the traditional understanding when she discusses the ability of art to overcome mourning and melancholy. It is a matter of certain techniques, she writes, “which, without simply inverting the mourning into mania, secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimating power over the lost Thing.”⁵

³ Ibid. pp. 124–125.

⁴ Concerning the relation between melancholy and mania in Freud, see “Trauer und Melancholie,” *Studienausgabe*, vol. III, p. 207ff.

⁵ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 109.

Art is able to sublimate and reconcile. In the successful working through of the internal conflict, the libido is bound via sublimation into language. In mania, such a binding does not take place, where we see, instead, rather an attempt to cut all ties to the internal, painful crypt that the lost object of love (the Thing) left behind, and to instead project the pain outwards as hatred.

But the question is how mania should be understood as a literary strategy. Isn't there a form of linguistic mania that functions like a release – which would mean a turning of melancholy towards the outside, an act of liberation? Isn't there always an aspect of manic obsession in the author, to the extent that he succeeds in achieving his own artistic language – an “excess of precision” or “a manic accuracy of language,” of which Barthes takes note in Flaubert and Robbe-Grillet?⁶ – that is, a form of mania which is perhaps better known under other names, but which has the same essential meaning: a state of linguistic intensity. In one of his most well-known fragments, Novalis characterizes such a state of *Sprachbegeisterung* as follows: “But if I now were forced to speak? and if this linguistic drive to speak were a sign of the inspiration of language, the activity of the language within me? and if my will wanted nothing other than all that to which I was compelled – this could be, finally, without my knowledge or belief, poetry, and could clarify one of the secrets of language? and thus I would be called to become a writer, for a writer is surely just someone who is obsessed with language.”⁷

A writer is one who allows himself to be enraptured by language, who doesn't try to control or stem its flow, but rather yields to its free play. The self-existent life of language cannot be grasped other than by being responsive, and possessing a focused, heightened awareness: “One cannot understand language, because language cannot or will not understand itself; the genuine Sanskrit speaks in order to speak, because speech is its pleasure and its essence.”⁸

The author is not one who uses language, but one who allows himself to be used by a language, a language that is entirely autonomous and “only cares about itself.” The figures of literary language are mathematical formulas,

6 Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris 1973, p. 44.

7 Novalis, “Monolog,” in *Fragment*, Novalis, *Werke Band 2, Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl, München 1978, pp. 438–39.

8 Ibid.

writes Novalis: – “They constitute a world for themselves – They are simply engaged in a game with themselves.”⁹

Such a linguistic drive, a *Sprachbegeisterung*, can have a manic expression. Of course, the clinical concepts do not allow themselves to be translated entirely unproblematically into the sphere of aesthetics, but if mania manifests itself in an “irregular movement that unceasingly is taken up again,” as Foucault puts it, the issue is whether this is a mania that has been able to take place in language:

I am something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek, like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in a cage and dead in a cage, born and then dead, born in a cage and then dead in a cage, in a word like a beast, in one of their words, like such a beast, and that I seek, like such a beast. with my little strength, such a beast...¹⁰

Who is speaking in that language? Perhaps that is the wrong question. It doesn't seem to be a question of an identifiable subject expressing himself in language, but rather words that, in a frenetic stream, pass through a place, which has not yet been determined as an “I.” Modern pessimists like Samuel Beckett and Thomas Bernhard had the goal of liberating themselves from the internal space of contemplation via writing.

Bernhard describes himself as a melancholiac obsessed with death, who experiences a certain pleasure in lugubriousness: “Melancholy is a very pleasing condition. I very easily and happily drift into it. /.../ And this condition can last for weeks. And I think that perhaps the ideal medicine for me, or the only useful medicine for me, is melancholy, the constant intake of melancholia in pill form.”¹¹

Obsession with death, solitude, internal darkness – the picture Bernhard paints of himself is that of a classical melancholiac. But in his works one can

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels*, New York 1991 (1958), transl. by the author, pp. 386–87.

find a wide variety of different strategies for dealing with death and melancholy. In the early texts, it is a matter of affirming poetic wistfulness. Here we find a romantic invoking of night and death as mysterious conditions – melancholy is the tone that predominates. One example of this is the novel *Amras* – a story about mourning, illness, and death. Despite the pitch black thematics, the language is saturated by sensuality and a focused poetry. After an unsuccessful suicide attempt, two brothers withdraw to a secluded tower. In their isolation, they engage in studies of natural science and musical mathematics. Their minds, darkened by grief, gain access to a sphere of “greater uncertainty,” where, in inexplicable moments, the night changes into dazzling light; “This fantastic thing unveiled everything to us, but just for a second, only to then go back into its darkness...”¹² The melancholic darkness reveals itself in its ambivalent doubleness: sickness, sorrow, and death – but also in moments of brilliant lucidity. These melancholic epiphanies can only be formulated in fragmentary form. *Amras* is not a unitary story but rather a somewhat loosely connected collection of letters and notes. In the end, the younger brother takes his life in despair over his increasingly unbearable epilepsy, but leaves enigmatic fragments behind: “Ultimately, death is something for practitioners of higher mathematics, and nothing more.”¹³

We see a relation here between Bernhard and the classic topoi of melancholy: like the writer Montaigne, the two brothers in *Amras* withdraw to their lonely tower. In the darkness of the tower – and “darkened by the epilepsy” within – they pursue their speculative sciences. The tower serves as a symbol of a deeper isolation – “only in themselves” do the two brothers find “the source of music and science.” In the solitude of the soul, the melancholic achieves his deep insights: “Withdrawn ever deeper into our plangent heads, we filled our tower with our grief.”¹⁴ Out of the isolation, epilepsy, and the feverish awareness of death, speaks mourning and despair. But in the solitude and darkness burns the fire of contemplation as well, which, in moments of lucidity, transforms the night. But these moments cannot be

11 Bernhard, “Drei Tage” in *Der Italiener*, Salzburg 1971, pp. 88–89.

12 Bernhard, *Amras*, Frankfurt am Main 1986 (1964), p. 30.

13 Ibid. p. 65.

14 Ibid. p. 9.

held on to; the fragmentary text of melancholy contains no deliverance: the epileptic brother perishes. In his affirmation of darkness and loneliness he retreats further and further into himself. But not in order to return to the world, as with Montaigne, but – as the fragmentary sketches become increasingly volatile – in order to pass into the final night.

No emancipation from melancholy occurs here. The Montaignesque turning point never appears. Instead, the night spreads itself out more and more and finally becomes impenetrable. It is only when language is able to free itself from the inner crypt of the soul that overcoming melancholy becomes possible, even if this transcendence of melancholy is never final; language always carries melancholy's blackness.

In Bernhard's later texts, melancholy becomes a sort of mania. The words are no longer sung, as in *Amras*, but are rather pounded out in new, aggressive rhythms: a new hardness, a new machinery – at once brutal and infinitely artistic. There is a rhetorical obsessiveness here that makes the syntax sway: combinations of words and figures are repeated again and again – varied, inverted, and then repeated. Everywhere, the same manic repetition; the precision of this repetitive madness creates feelings of dizziness.¹⁵ Here, we find what psychoanalysis had thought to be impossible: relief from melancholy by means of mania as an artistic strategy.

The lyrical, melancholy tone from the early texts is completely gone. In novels such as *Gehen* and *Korrektur* we see rather an active overcoming of the introverted gloominess, which paves the way for the later autobiographical work. If melancholy means creating an inner contemplative place, Bernhard's strategy in these texts is aimed at overcoming not only melancholy, but also its preconditions. It is ultimately a matter of declaring all forms of contemplative introspectiveness to be impossible by dissolving the very distinction between internal and external. In the repetitive stream of Bernhardian language, there is no longer a place for the melancholic interiority of the "I."

Bernhard himself has described his journey into writing. As a consumptive, seemingly doomed eighteen-year-old, he witnesses his beloved grandfather

¹⁵ The Italian critic Aldo Gargani has characterized the use of language in Bernhard's later novels as an infinite phrase. See Gargani, *La phrase infinie de Thomas Bernhard*, Paris 1990.

die, and hears indirectly about his mother's death; he who never got to meet his father, and herewith has had all ties to the past cut, decides now to become the master of his own fate. It is *he*, not they, who henceforth shall determine his fate. It is precisely then that he is born as a writer, and it is then that he makes the necessary acquaintance with Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*: "For weeks I refused to concern myself with any other reading matter whatsoever. The frightfulness of the evil spirits had made me strong, had shown me a path, told me that I was on the right path, *out*. A wild and *great* literature had befallen me, and I emerged from it as a hero."¹⁶ With the help of language, Bernhard succeeds in turning the pain outwards. It is with a demonic obsession that he tackles his writing, a writing that is about survival.

Bernhard's work might seem to be a clear example of the manic reversal studied by psychoanalysis – the transition from melancholy to mania means that the internal emptiness is projected outward as hatred. In Bernhard's case, the manic hatred is directed against Austria, the Fatherland. "People are good at describing what they hate," writes Bernhard.¹⁷ He himself never tires of reviling his home country. This hate is the driving force behind his writing. It allows for what Freud called "the manic celebration," but which is something entirely different in Bernhard – it has been transformed into a celebration of language.

In manic repetitive language, everything that had belonged to an inner space of the psyche is belched out. Everything must come out: there is no longer any inside or outside, there is no longer any "I." Bernhardian language succeeds in reconciling brutality with a mannerism that has been taken to an extreme. Everything is a mechanical rhetoric that hammers out its figures with ruthless dexterity. In the novel *Gehen*, this "through and through philosophical condition" is described as a "state of complete indifference."¹⁸ In a form of furious indifference, melancholy is overcome.

In Beckett as well, there is a quest for linguistic indifference, a sort of neutrality in language. Unlike Bernhard, Beckett never explicitly described himself as a melancholiac. But formally, there are nevertheless clear similarities in the

¹⁶ Bernhard, *Frost*, Frankfurt am Main 1976.

¹⁷ Bernhard, "Ist es eine Komödie? Ist es eine Tragödie?" in *Prosa*, Frankfurt am Main 1976.

¹⁸ Bernhard, *Gehen*, Frankfurt am Main 1971, p. 101.

desire of the two authors to overcome a tie to a subjective realm. In Beckett as well, there are different methods: one is that of the grotesque and the absurd comedy – in laughter, one is not alone. The other is the cold language beyond the self, the *neutral* writing that is decoupled both from the body as well as from thought.

What we witness in the latter case is a breakdown of traditionally harmonious parameters: the “I” doesn’t express itself in its language and does not live in its body. Beckett’s texts are “post-humanist,” if with “humanism” one means the belief in a human subject that at least to some extent has access to itself. In Beckett, the “I” does not know itself. Here, there is a fundamental gap between the “I” and language, cogito and voice – the “I” does not know what it is saying. The voice does not come from an internal energy, but is driven by an external energy that, as Blanchot puts it, relieves the voice of all intimacy.¹⁹

In *The Unnamable* we find this relentless, repetitive voice that is expressed from a place that is not an “I,” a disconnected voice in search of its subject: “... you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my history, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”²⁰ This is an “I” entirely without access to itself. The gap appears unbridgeable, but something drives the manically relentless voice on – it can scarcely be hope of reconciliation or the dream of being at peace in the harmonious insight of a stable subject into itself. It is rather a kind of repetitive compulsion, a death drive that is twisted together with the very act of linguistic articulation.

In both Bernhard and Beckett we have a working through of an original loss, a painful absence. In both cases, this internal void has been transformed into a manic hatred that is directed outwards – in Bernhard’s case against the Fatherland, in Beckett’s, directly against the mother: “I’m looking for my

19 Blanchot, review of *L’Innommable*, in *The Critical Heritage*, Graver & Federman, London 1979, p. 119.

20 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels*, p. 214.

mother to kill her, I should have thought of that a bit earlier, before being born.”²¹ Perhaps psychoanalysis is right that, clinically speaking, mania never represents an improvement. But in its productive, literary form it seems nonetheless to be a way to go on living – an aspect of what Bernhard calls “Überlebenskunst.”²²



Bernhard and Beckett do not accept Montaigne’s conception of the writer as an introverted melancholiac who, with the help of language, is able to return to a clear, bright reality. For the humanist Montaigne, the darkness and heaviness of melancholy is merely a phase, something the soul goes through in order to return to a balanced and non-melancholic mood: “Do you desire a healthy man, do you want to have him disciplined, stable, and safe? Well then, wrap him in darkness, idleness, and heaviness. We have to become as stupid as the animals to become wise; blinded, to be guided.”²³ From the depths of darkness, the spark bursts forth. Returning to the world is, for Montaigne, not a problem; he himself has successfully done just that in his *Essays*.

This inversion is not as unproblematic for a modern writer such as Bernhard. One cannot “write oneself out” from the melancholic gloominess without entirely freeing oneself from the inner crypt of the “I” – without obliterating the subject by expelling everything that is psychic, indeed ultimately the psyche or soul as such, from the frenetic repetitiveness of the machinery of language. Darkness and death don’t constitute conditions that can be conjured up from the depths of melancholy, but must rather be driven out: death has been transformed into a repetitive process – a death drive that has become one with language itself. But this process never ends, a completed process of expulsion is unthinkable.

In Beckett we also see this thanatological drive, this inner, manic compulsion to drive language further: “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” A final overcoming of melancholy is not possible – the *nigredo phase* is endless.

21 D. Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, New York 1978. p. 339.

22 Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, Frankfurt am Main 1988 (1985), p. 302.

23 Montaigne, *Essays*, p. 553 [Translation modified slightly. -Translator]

Even if the space of inner pain is the source of literature, literature is, nonetheless, not therapeutic. Literature does not reconcile, but rather bears melancholy within itself as an enigmatic encryption. It both liberates and preserves the encryption in language.

Is it this which distinguishes the literary – that language does not reconcile, but bears traces of darkness and pain? That the crypt never allows itself to be emptied by mania, but is written on, out, further out, as a melancholic remainder; a cipher that characterizes all poetic language?

But this cipher can also be transformed into a completed parable, as in Kafka. But here, we are at the limits of melancholy.

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VI. The Hunger Artist

Franz Kafka

I merely slip out through the loopholes in the law for which I have a particularly good nose.

Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog"

The world of Franz Kafka appears to be marked by the law's utter and irremediable absence. In Kafka, an anonymous hero is searching for an order that he has been placed outside of in an absolute way. The meaning of this search is, as we know, impossible to interpret, ever-evasive, deferred, or interwoven in enigmatic parables.

What is not enigmatic, but rather utterly manifest, is the catastrophic consequences of being beyond the pale of the law. It would also appear that Kafka forced himself, in a way that proved fatal, beyond the law – in order to achieve that small bit of freedom that is needed to write. And thus we must understand the law in a broader sense than usual: as all of the more or less obscure bonds or passwords or secret codes that have the power to create a community. It may have to do with food, sexuality, language, or social life as a whole. The law, then, is what Kafka is fundamentally writing about: both under, and outside the law's merciless jurisdiction.

We know well the consequences this quest had for Kafka's own life. He drove himself, a systematically practicing vegetarian, to undernourishment, of which he – in connection with tuberculosis – would die. As Marthe Roberts put it, "he was unable to understand how one simultaneously could both write and eat."¹

Kafka is outside the shared repast. This is one of the most important aspects of Kafka's *atopia* – that he and his heroes are in a non-place outside all legally constituted communities.

Another aspect that, in various ways, is connected to self-starvation is Kafka's relation to sexuality, mirrored in his celibacy and his postponement of the planned wedding to Felice – equally cruel as it is infinitely subtle and sensitive – which is described in their correspondence.

Kafka puts himself outside the law governing food and sexuality, but as, Roberts says: “it was in his orientation to food more than anywhere else that Kafka made an effort to acquire an alternative law, and it was here that his condition came dangerously close to being pathological.”

Kafka rejected his family's eating habits, his nervous stomach forced him to adopt his own diet. In 1912, he became a vegetarian. He abstained “not only from meat, fish, eggs and alcoholic beverages, but also from tea, coffee, chocolate, and, as far as possible, from all food containing the slightest nutrition (‘nothing,’ he said one day only half in jest, ‘is more nourishing than a slice of lemon’).”¹ For a time, Kafka adopted the bizarre dietary teachings of the American Fletcher, which among other things mandated extreme rumination, which – at least in Kafka's conscientious application – made the very idea of shared meals impossible. With tremendous self-distance, Kafka wrote in November 1912 to Felice that his father “was forced to hide his face behind the newspaper while I ate the evening meal.”²

In fact, Kafka sought to make himself entirely independent of food. He saw fasting as a superior instrument in his writing. It became a component of his active attempt to escape “the patriarchal sphere” that had depressed him so much. Starving, for Kafka, meant getting rid of the law of the father by means of a physical refusal, the meaning of which seems to be: live in a way that involves slowly withering away, if one is relatively free and creative, rather than living in a way that involves being fully engulfed by the repressive father.

1. *Kafka's Loneliness*, London 1982 (1979).

2. *Ibid.* p. 95.

3. *Ibid.* p. 95.

4. *Briefe an Felice*, Frankfurt am Main 1988, p. 79, dated November 7, 1912. See also Max Brod's comment on Kafka's vegetarianism in the letter to Felice of November 22, 1912. It may be worth noting that Kafka's father was the son of a butcher.

The force of Kafka's ideas about the importance of a systematic self-starvation is propagated as a crucial theme in his work. Three texts in particular are impossible to ignore in a study of refusal to eat qua text or writing: first, the obvious "A Hunger Artist," then the more intricate tales *The Metamorphosis* and "Investigations of a Dog."

"A Hunger Artist," which came out posthumously, and which, with cruel irony, Kafka was proofreading on his deathbed, is an extreme study in humiliation, more specifically, in the humiliation of living off the vagaries of public interest in seeing people openly put an end to themselves. At first, the main character – an ascetic exhibitionist in a black leotard, which displays his protruding ribs – achieves great success, even if he is harassed by his guardians, who work as butchers during the week. In fact, the only thing he is dissatisfied with is that the audience is not radical enough in their taste for self-obliteration. He wants to go much further than starving publicly for forty days – which is the established time period, and which, incidentally, coincides with the time of fasting of the ecclesiastical year – for he himself knows "no limits to his ability to starve."⁵

But soon people lose interest in this glimpse of self-starvation, and the artist leaves the impresario and takes a job at the circus. There, humiliation commences on a large scale. A father looks at him, pointing and explaining to his children what sort of animal he is. But what can children understand of hunger art? His cage is placed against the wall of the animal stables, but with the passing and soon non-existent interest in his art, it has ultimately become an obstacle. He is quickly forgotten.

When he is later discovered by the foreman, barely visible in the straw in the cage, he issues a few strange replies. He says he no longer wants to be admired for his art, those days are definitively over. To starve is not an "art," is not any sort of effort – for, as he says, "I cannot do anything else." And that for the simple, though seemingly incomprehensible reason that he has not been able to find any food he liked. He is lacking in something so fundamental as *appetite*. The reaction of the others to his confession is quite simply to

⁵ Quotations from "Der Hungerkünstler" are from *Ein Hungerkünstler. Vier Geschichten*, Berlin, 1924.

bury the artist. And not simply that. As a kind of revenge, they release a wild animal into the cage that really *does* have an appetite for food, a young panther that inspires “a glorious invigoration” in all who behold it. The sentence that follows writes, *en clair*, the law on food in the animal’s behavior: “Nothing wrong with him.” The food tastes good to him, the “noble body” appears to “carry with it freedom,” a freedom that – significantly enough – seems to live “somewhere in his mouth.” This freedom, which is the freedom of the law, is not Kafka’s own, but he lets us see it with all the desired clarity. In jarring ironic contrast to the revelation of the hunger artist, the *joie de vivre* is said to stream “with glowing intensity from his jaws,” and the audience gathers around the cage.

The brutal point of the story is that art as an institution has no interest in the fact that a human being is in the cage, it is the cynical need for entertainment that matters. But neither does art have an interest in the deviant, when it goes *too far*. The hunger artist wants to go further, but is stopped by his impresario. But even worse is his confession that he does not want to be admired for what he does. He says, like Beckett about his writing, that *he cannot do anything else*. This is of course incomprehensible. It violates a basic precept in art, one concerning the pact between the stage and the audience, created by the need for entertainment. It is punctured by the hunger artist’s failure to adjust, but even more fundamentally by the peculiar art he has chosen to pursue. Hunger art is undeniably a kind of anti-art, whose approach to food clashes with the prevalent perspective on experiences of art. In the long run, when the hunt for the sensational has died down, how would one be able to consume something, with a good appetite and in good taste, that is in itself a refusal to have anything to do with food? Kafka’s parable becomes, in all its treacherous irony, a mockery of the perception of the experience of art as consumption, as an act of appropriation via *eating*.⁶

In this story, Kafka succeeds in establishing the kind of distance to his subject that enables the reader to feel entertained, while at the same time allowing a chasm to open up in the middle of the amusement that is the

6 Kafka is of course not alone in this mocking of the passive enjoyment of public art in modernism. See Brecht’s dispute about a culinary public attitude within the theater.

subject of the story. One reads, to put it mildly, with mixed feelings. Unlike the hunger artist, the narrator also sees with the eyes of the audience, and he understands, inside and out, the demands of the story – what we might call the significance of the framing. Thus, Kafka can provide us with a food which is about the impossibility of food. This meaning can be divined in his other two stories, but it is implied in a subordinate clause in Kafka's *Diaries*: "... because my primary food has other roots in other strata."⁷

The central role of food in *Metamorphosis* is seldom noted, but what is obvious is that Gregor Samsa dies of starvation, which is a great relief to his father.

"Ah," said Mr. Samsa, "now we can give thanks to God." He crossed himself, and the three women followed his example. Greta, not taking her eye off the body, said: "Look how thin he had become. He stopped eating such a long time ago. I brought food in and took it out, and it was always untouched." Indeed, Gregor's body was utterly flat and desiccated – only so apparent now that he was no longer up on his little legs, and there was nothing else to distract the eye.⁸

This starvation is not primarily forced upon him from without, but is the result of Gregor Samsa's having been transformed into vermin and losing all appetite. In point of fact, this deeply comical story about the most degrading sort of alienation can be read as a study in what happens – the scandal, the disgust – when the law of the sacred repast is violated. Gregor's sister, who is the closest to Gregor of anyone in the family, is the first to help him, yet also – after increasingly grotesque scenes – the first to want to get rid of him. It is only she who gives him food, but the food she at first lovingly puts before him immediately gives rise to disgust. His favorite food, the primordial milk, provides the opposite of nourishment.

⁷ Date: January 29, 1922. Orig. "weil meine Hauptnahrung von anderen Wurzeln in anderer Luft kommt."

⁸ "Metamorphosis," in Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, transl. Michael Hofmann, London 2007, pp. 142–43.

Not until he reached the door did he realize what had tempted him there; it was the smell of food. There stood a dish full of sweetened milk, with little slices of white bread floating in it. He felt like laughing for joy, because he was even hungrier now than he had been that morning, and straightaway he dunked his head into the milk past his eyes. But before long he withdrew it again in disappointment; it wasn't just that he found eating difficult on account of his damaged left flank – it seemed he could only eat if the whole of his body, panting, participated – more that he disliked the taste of milk, which otherwise was a favourite drink, and which his sister had certainly put out for that reason. In fact he pulled his head away from the dish almost with revulsion, and crawled back into the middle of the room.⁹

Soon, he is eating only what is rejected by the rest of the family – “old, half rotten vegetables, bones from the evening meal, covered in a congealed white sauce” or that which he himself only a little while ago had refused, such as a “piece of cheese, which [he] had declared inedible a few days earlier.”

There is much in the animal nature of his behavior towards food that shocks and disturbs the ritual family togetherness. Gregor thinks and feels like the depressed and frightened salesman that he has been, but unavoidably eats and behaves like an animal. It is only the sister who dares to approach Gregor's room. The father and mother, filled with horror, keep their distance, and the horror turns into utter panic as soon Gregor shows himself.

The only thing Gregor at first has any taste for is precisely that which is rejected by others, that which, is repugnant and disgusting to people.

“I wonder if I have less sensitivity now?” he thought, as he sucked avidly on the cheese, which of all the proffered foodstuffs had most spontaneously and powerfully attracted him. Then, in rapid succession, and with eyes watering with satisfaction, he ate up the cheese, the vegetables and the sauce; the fresh foods, on the other hand, were not to his liking – he couldn't even bear the smell of them, and dragged such things as he wanted to eat a little way away from them.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid. pp. 106–07.

As we know, animals do not cry, their eyes do not well up with tears of satisfaction. Gregor is a sentimental and nervous animal, a monstrous thing, half human, half animal, who in his new form scandalizes his surroundings. The eating behavior of animals is generally not disgusting, they do what they do, but people who behave like animals are considered disgusting. Disgust is an affect that presupposes a hierarchical understanding of taste that is connected with the laws governing food. What happens in Kafka a violation of law in the form of this hybrid, *taste* and *appetite* also cease to exist in a strict sense. Gregor, the vermin, does not taste food, but like the investigating dog (as we shall see) he devours it. The appetizing-unappetizing dichotomy no longer has any meaning; it only applies to the others. But Kafka establishes a double optics in his stories, he gives us both perspectives – and it is when the incompatible perspectives are jarringly broken that his writing achieves its unmistakable, painfully comic irony.

Gregor's eating habits are quite simply insufferable for the parents. "Neither, to be sure, did they wish that Gregor would starve to death, but they would perhaps not have been able to endure knowing anything more about his meals than what was told to them."¹⁰ What sort of things did they manage to hear, what did Gregor's sister tell them? Enough to justify the conclusion: better that he starve to death than that their own appetites be further put to the test.

In fact, the mere cognizance of Gregor's condition suffices to limit the appetite of the rest of the family members.

Gregor kept hearing them vainly exhorting one another to eat, and receiving no reply, other than: "Thank you, I've enough," or words to that effect. Perhaps they didn't drink anything either. Often, his sister asked his father whether he would like a beer, and offered to fetch it herself, and when her father made no reply, she said, to get over his hesitation, that she could equally well send the janitor woman out for it, but in the end his father said a loud "No," and there was an end of the matter.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 109–10.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 138f.

¹² Ibid. p. 112.

Of course, Gregor's father's attempt to murder him doesn't help: the father throws a bunch of apples at Gregor and one of them gets stuck on his back, which is disabling and makes the figure of Gregor all the more sickening. Since no one dares to come close to Gregor to remove the apple, which is in a state of progressive decay, a trace of the attack remains in the most striking way.

Gregor's room is emptied and only cursorily cleaned; it more and more resembles a refuse heap. Boxes of ash and waste are put there. One can say that Gregor is now a very part of the waste. Food as a sign of a final, remaining family tie has played out its role.

"Gregor was now eating almost nothing at all. Only sometimes, happening to pass the food that had been put out for him, he would desultorily take a morsel in his mouth, and keep it there for hours, before usually spitting it out again."¹³

It is as if with a detached feeling of unconcern, he tested "for fun," from a distance, whether food really concerned him.

Gregor investigates and spies on the eating habits of the others, which only reinforces his feeling of alienation.

It struck Gregor that out of all the various sounds one could hear, it was that of their grinding teeth that stood out, as though to demonstrate to Gregor that teeth were needed to eat with, and the best toothless gums were no use. "But I do have an appetite," Gregor said to himself earnestly, "only not for those things. The way those tenants fill their boots, while I am left to starve."¹⁴

Curiously, Gregor – he who has rejected all food in the material sense – is speaking here about appetite. What sublime food for toothless jaws does he have in mind? Is it similar to Kafka's "primary food" from the "second strata"?

Perhaps it is a question of the purely metaphorical food, with which his sister a few pages later will attract Gregor, via her violin playing, and thus dislodge his animal identity. He faces a crucial question: "Could he be an

¹³ Ibid. p. 132.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 134.

animal, to be so moved by music? It was as though he sensed a way to the unknown sustenance he longed for.”¹⁵

Beyond the laws of material food with its hierarchy of taste and attendant notions of what is disgusting, there is a sublime that exists in the form of music. But only for Gregor. It is the sublime that forces him – disgust incarnate – out into the room where all are gathered. And that leads to the scene that finally marks the termination of Gregor’s life. With cruel irony, he establishes a relationship with the sublime in the same place and at the same moment that the others grow upset about his miserable appearance. Here, the limit is drawn, the limit of the law: one and the same place, one and the same time, contains two antagonistic places, two antagonistic times. It is moving that Gregor, the moment before he himself will be cleared away like trash, shall receive an idea of “the unknown sustenance” beyond the strictly corporeal which weighs down life on earth.

But it is not only in *Metamorphosis* that Kafka experiments with the idea of an other, alternative food.

We encounter a similar idea in “Investigations of a Dog,” also a story about a peculiar hybrid, a dog that is more or less than a dog. An eccentric, a deviant among dogs, in which “something that wasn’t quite right, a sick point,” separates him from others. These include his passion for the truth, and his engagement with seemingly hopeless investigations.

His most thorough study is devoted to the question of canine nutrition, “the chief object of our reflections.”¹⁶

But it turns out that this dog does not have any desire whatsoever to focus on food itself. He gulps down his food, but does not consider it to be worth the slightest “systematic economic interpretation of the usual sort.”¹⁷

No, this dog is engaged in a more exalted, genealogical question, which no other dog is interested in trying to comprehend: “Where does the earth get this nourishment from?”

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 136.

¹⁶ The quotations from “Investigations of a Dog” are from Kafka, *The Great Wall of China and Other Short Works*, transl. Malcolm Pasley, London 2002, p. 149

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 150. [Translation slightly modified. -Translator]

What is distinctive is the extraordinary earnestness with which the dog seeks an answer to this question, as if he sensed a completely revolutionizing insight. It is not that the answer is sought outside the canine family as such, in a divine power or the like. No, "all knowledge, all questions, and all the answers are to be found in dogs."¹⁸

It is for this reason that the dog becomes so disappointed that all remain silent when he poses his question to them. Those who must know refuse to speak of the truth. But the same is true of the dog who seeks the truth. If they carry the truth within themselves, he likewise must carry the truth within himself. Paradoxically, he, the one posing the question, must, like them, also be withholding the answer.

How can we understand this unique rhetorical situation, in which the one doing the asking knows the answer to his own question, but must withhold it until some other dog expresses it? At the same time this silence, or better, this refusal to speak, depends on the nature of the answer, because the one posing the question is convinced that the answer contains an insight that would make the canine race "ascend to true freedom." A great deal is obviously at stake here.

The solitary, undernourished dog apparently possesses a knowledge of the significance of food that cannot be spoken, because it has to do with the common life of all. If it can be spoken aloud at all, it must be spoken aloud by all. What would happen if he alone spoke the truth? Would the others join in, or would they continue to remain silent? Why is the dog so afraid to take up the cudgels for a looming revolution in the life of dogs?

The central image that describes this predicament indicates the dramatic importance of the dog's inquiries about the origins of food.

With bone as tough as iron, containing the most precious marrow, nothing can be done other than getting all dogs to unite all the teeth in a collective bite. Of course, it is only an image and an exaggerated one at that; if all the teeth were prepared, they wouldn't even need to bite, the bones would open and the marrow would be accessible even to the weakest dog. If I

18 Ibid. p. 151. [Translation modified. -Translator]

stick with this image, then my intentions, my questions, my research certainly aim at something terrible. I want to compel this canine unity, I want to let the bones open up under the pressure of the collective will, I then want to have the other dogs run off to the life that is so dear to them, and then, entirely alone, in the presence of no one, suck in the marrow. It sounds awful, almost as if I did not want to confine myself to the marrow in a single bone but rather craved the marrow of the canine family itself. But it is only an image. The marrow, which is at issue here, is not food, it is the opposite, poison.¹⁹

It is as if the dog's own picture, expressive as it is, surprises even him with its implications. What he is seeking with his questions is just as mysterious as "the unknown food" the metamorphosed Gregor longed for, but far more worrying. It is a food that isn't a food, the marrow which only the emaciated, only the "de-marrowed," can crave. He is searching for the marrow of the entire canine family, the marrow which unites all dogs into a single race, connected not only through blood and knowledge, not only by the marrow of ordinary dog bones, but by the noblest of marrow, in bones as tough as iron. And he does this, as it has been revealed, in order to be able to suck it in himself, alone.

What sort of unknown food is this? Is it not similar to the nutriment taken in at the Holy Communion, where the blood and body of Christ are food, just as symbolic as they are real, and which constitutes the spiritual foundation for the human community?

But the quote does not end there. This is just an image, the dog says. The marrow in question is the opposite of food. It is a poison.

We do not learn why it is the way it is, only that the entire obsessive quest to answer the question of food origins leads to this terrible discovery, which certainly explains why all the other dogs – and even he himself – must remain silent. They remain silent not *despite* their knowledge, but in all probability *because* they understand the situation: the foundation of food is the opposite of food. The marrow of the canine family is poison.

¹⁹ Our transl. (This passage is missing in *The Great Wall*), Kafka, "Forschungen eines Hundes" in *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 334.

Where is the promised liberation in this terrible insight?

We never find out. What we do know is that that which distinguishes the dog from his race is that which makes him pose the question of its ultimate foundation. And it is probably the same thing: it is just as much the question of the foundation that is the very dividing line. He poses the question, and as long as he poses the question, the difference is reinforced. In this difference, this error, lies “the blame for everything;” undernourishment, which is inextricably linked with questioning, also belongs here. For as the saying goes: “Our path goes through hunger, the loftiest cannot be achieved except through the most difficult thing, if it even is possible to achieve, and the most difficult thing for us is voluntary hunger.”²⁰

The dog has thus not only committed an error in the past, he continues to commit the offense voluntarily, indeed, the error is in a sense his entire existence. Although his passion for truth does not lead the dog to anything other than a shipwreck, there is no turning back. The experiments continue, and the most important means of conducting them is fasting. For as he says – and here, Kafka would be able to agree entirely – “hunger is something I, even today, regard as the final and most outstanding resource.”²¹

What is interesting is that this dog, who through his past deviant behavior took the blame for having left the canine family, now, at the end of the story, projects the blame on his ancestors. Indeed, now it is not *he* but rather *they* who are “responsible for everything”:

I must confess that I regard them, even if I dare not say so openly, as being responsible for everything; it is they who bear the guilt for our dog’s life, so I could easily respond to their threats with counter-threats, but before their knowledge I bow, it came from sources that are known to us no longer, and for that reason, much as I feel the urge to contend with them, I would never actually transgress their laws, I merely slip out through the loopholes in the law for which I have a particularly good nose.²²

20 *The Great Wall*, p. 170. [Translation modified slightly. -Translator]

21 *Ibid.* [Translation modified slightly. -Translator]

22 *Ibid.* p. 171.

The unity of the race that he previously sought in a food beyond food, a marrow that is poison, is now given historical legitimacy by the laws instituted by his ancestors, laws that prevailed and were held sacrosanct through history. The truth-seeking activities of the dog result from his active ability to find fault, to locate, with his special sense of smell, gaps in these venerated laws.

Since the hunger seems to be inextricably linked to the dog's defective ardor for truth, the question arises as to whether it is in accordance with the law at all. What the dog wants to show, with a subtlety of argumentation that is not inferior even to the wise interpretations of the Talmud, is that the fast which he had always exalted as his finest instrument of knowledge, in point of fact, is a *threefold* violation of the laws. A thorough study of "the commenting science" – without a doubt a reference to the Jewish interpretative tradition – leads the dog to this grim conclusion:

...the first sage wished to forbid fasting, and what a sage wishes is already done, so fasting was forbidden; the second sage not only agreed with the first, but actually held fasting to be impossible, that is, he piled on the first prohibition a second one imposed by the very nature of dogs; the first sage accepted this and withheld his explicit prohibition, in other words he commanded all dogs, in the light of what had been made clear, to use their own discernment and prohibit fasting for themselves. So here was a threefold prohibition instead of the normal single one, and I had violated it.²³

But as we saw earlier, this certainty of his own criminality has no effect on the dog's behavior. He continues to starve, and it drives him, like the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa, further away from the community: "I felt here as if I was not just cut off by the space of a short run from my brothers, but infinitely far removed from everybody, and as if I would die, not really of hunger at all, but because I was so forsaken."²⁴

²³ Ibid. p. 172.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 173.

When the dog is ready to die in his state of abandonment, he receives a visit from a handsome, unknown dog who is hunting in the area. And the latter gently demands that the dying dog, now coughing up blood, can no longer be there, otherwise the hunt cannot continue. And the hunt “must” continue. This “must” represents the self-evident law that the investigative dog cannot or will not understand.

But interestingly enough, it is precisely in this final, mild friction with the boundary of law that the dog has a tremendous musical experience, like the one that draws Gregor Samsa into the final scene. The hunting dog sings with a force that threatens to break the ear drums. And, as in Gregor Samsa’s case, the music seems in a peculiar way to be directed solely to the impoverished creature: “it seemed to exist solely for my sake, this voice before whose sublimity the woods fell silent, for my sake alone; who was I, that I dared still remain here, spreading myself out in my own blood and filth?”²⁵

As so often in Kafka, the low is confronted with the high, a fundamental source of ferment in the aesthetics of modernism. But the encounter is in itself a marginal experience, in which the sublime appears just as enigmatic as it appears powerful – in fact, it can only be perceived outside the law. Because the singing dog does not even know that he is singing, the song is directed exclusively to the wretched offender.

Laws apparently exist in order to prevent access, not only to the truth, but also to the sublime beauty beyond consumerism. Food’s food, the most noble marrow, which is a poison, has thus a structural connection to the sublime, unknown food of music and art. Music is also the dog’s second major area of research.

But if truth and sublime beauty rest on a crime with the power to unite the race, what is that crime? What crime is the silent community brooding over? What secret repast has established its law-governed pact? It must be a horrible act, ritualized in a sacrificial meal, where food ultimately is a poison that forms the basis for unity of the race only in an unknown and repressed way.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 175.

The canine race remains silent, that is its most distinctive characteristic. It is the same silence that Gregor Samsa quivered before, when he heard the sound of teeth, as the three boarders dug into the flesh.



Despite Kafka's methodical self-starvation and his deep nihilism, it is in no way obvious that he should be regarded as a melancholiac. Kafka does not allow himself to be possessed by the affect of melancholy, in Kafka we do not see its traditional emblems – no black suns; no swans in the reflecting pool; no ruins or isolated towers where a cogitating solitary being carries out his tours de force. Nor is Kafka a melancholiac in the narrower modernistic sense captured by Julia Kristeva by the formula of the stranger in his native language in *Soleil noir*.

We know that Kafka sought a linguistic clarity and an utter faithfulness to written German. The enigmatic or incomprehensible in Kafka is not in diction or style but rather in the way the story is told, the tone, the perspective, the hallucinatory imagination. Kafka did not want to be a *poète maudit*, one of the mythical eccentrics of modernism outside the human community, but he was nonetheless that – by his own standards, a serious crime. This moralism effectively prevents him from mythologizing his work and protecting his suffering as a kind of emotional capital.

It is thus tempting to speak of Kafka's art as antimelancholic in an exemplary sense. He manages to keep melancholy at a distance by means of his radical cure, *to-starve-and-write*, which means emptying himself of all incorporated objects, all food that would enslave. Given that the melancholiac, if we are to believe psychoanalysis, is inseparable from the consumed, lost love object, Kafka is alone in another sense. He is not doubly enjoying and brooding like the melancholiac, but entirely alone in his solitude. He *writes* his food by searching it out in an unknown terrain, controlled by a different law than the usual one. He writes, one might say, in judgment.



VII. Eclipse and the Tattered Little Wooden Box

Gunnar Ekelöf

Now if you could recall some of the poetic moments in this hell – for example, the little train at Vrå. If it is in fact the case that the poetic and ... yes, the melancholic are the same...

Gunnar Ekelöf¹

Kafka's strategy is a creative destruction, one that sheds light on the creative aspect of melancholy. There may not be an art that is melancholic in a simple, psychological sense. One either writes oneself away from melancholy, as Kafka, Beckett, and Bernhard did, or makes use of it as a mask for the expression of suffering, like the sensual Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. In both cases melancholy is part of a communicative event, half symbol and writing, or tone – and thus in motion.

But in order not to all too quickly slip past the conceptual difficulties we got into, let us take a closer look at a writer who meets all the reasonable criteria of a melancholiac, in both the classical and modern senses. Moreover, in his late work, this writer approaches a position beyond melancholy that is reminiscent of Kafka: Gunnar Ekelöf.²

Ekelöf saw himself, and described himself, as a melancholiac. He frequently suffered, especially in the winter, of deep depression. And he attributed his well-known, continuous consumption of alcohol to this very state of mind:

1 *En självbiografi* [An Autobiography], Stockholm 1971, p. 298.

2 Surprisingly, no one so far has made a serious effort to place Ekelöf's writing in the tradition of melancholy.

“for a melancholic man, a man who is often in low spirits, it is necessary.”³ In his poetic works, he constantly returned to solitude, and to the nighttime hours as his proper time.⁴

But what is characteristic for Ekelöf is his productive attitude to low points, his ability to live and write with Hades as a constant point of support. Thus, neither his melancholy nor his drinking end up pulling him down, they were never distinct from the activity of writing. Paradoxically, fidelity to catastrophe seems to have saved him.

An element of this fruitful *valuation* of melancholy is Ekelöf’s symbolization of it. He *spoke* about it and was instinctively drawn to its classic symbolism. He wrote with growing feeling and insight, well-initiated, as we have seen, in Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, where he even corrected Panofsky’s classical interpretation on a crucial point. But what is important here is how this active familiarity with melancholy as affect, which exists in the writing process itself, is reflected in his poetic work as a whole, where the blindness and disappearance of the light are two sides of the same complex, with roots far back in time.

An early event focused on destruction and ruin that his imagination stamped with a meaning to which he constantly returned, was the solar eclipse of August 21st, 1914: “It was the middle of the day, but the birds stopped singing, and sat surprised, then were suddenly heavy with sleep on their branches. It was strange under the trees, there was a fragrance of dusk coming from the ferns underneath. And the darkness fell slowly down over the world like flocks of dusk-colored snow. Something happened in the heavens, magical powers played their game, it was like walking in a dream. One couldn’t look up, for then one became blind.”⁵

3 Carl Olov Sommar, *Gunnar Ekelöf. En biografi*, Stockholm 1989, p. 120.

4 A few examples. First, the Mallarmean lines at the beginning of “meningslöst orakel” [meaningless oracle] in *sent på jorden* [late on earth]: “midnight, slowly groping around in his own sleep slowly slowly like a dream just after midnight shall the suicide continue in the great hall of mirrors ...” Then some later and less panicky examples of the importance of the nighttime hours for Ekelöf: “Alone in the night I do best / alone with the secret lamp / liberated from the intrusive day ...” (*Stroutnes*), “Alone in the quiet Night / the only time I call my own! / Alone in the dark, tied to pain / I see how the Day distracted from the Truth” and “Alone in the quiet night I feel best / Alone with the wall clock, this machine for non-time” (The first resp. last poem in *Guide to the Underworld*, transl. Rika Lesser, Amherst 1980.)

5 Sommar, p. 27.

In 1952, he would publish the poem “Solförmörkelsen 1914” [Solar Eclipse 1914] in *Dagens Nyheter*, which ended: “The darkness I bear within me is the memory of the moment / when the shadow itself disappeared.” And later as well, after his mother’s death in the fall of 1961, he writes about this event.⁶

What does this melancholy, incorporated and symbolized at such an early stage in life, mean?

We know enough about Ekelöf’s early childhood to get an idea of what the significant causes of this melancholy are.⁷

What we can say with certainty is that the melancholy had a personal basis, and early on gelled into decisive traits that Ekelöf continued to interpret in his work.

Let us remain just a short while at three important stations on this journey that has melancholy as a point of departure: first, the debut collection *sent på jorden* [late on earth], along with the material published later, *En natt vid horisonten* [A Night on the Horizon], where we encounter melancholy in the modern sense. The black sun appears here in a particular kind of text, with a beseeching rhetoric rich in images, in the spirit of loss, of vanishing, and of the setting of the sun. In a refined prose poem form, both abstract in its

6 Both of these poems, “Solförmörkelsen 1914” [Solar eclipse 1914], first printed in *Dagens Nyheter* on June 23, 1952, and the second, with the same title (“Solförmörkelsen 1914”), [Solar eclipse 1914], printed in *SLA* 1961:7, are included in Anders Mortensen’s selection of Ekelöf poetry *Variationer* [Variations], Lund 1986. The latter poem runs as follows:

The fateful hour approached
and the forest remained silent.

In The Kingdom of the Dead, no being has a shadow.
There, every blade of grass is not a second hand,
There, no wheatear ticks
and no thrush sings a dinner bell.
But the dung beetle, the powerful
stood fencing with his arms on his hind legs,
damned his planet and its triumph,
and overcame death.

7 See here Reidar Ekner, “Det mörknar över vägen” [Night Falls over the Road], *Svensk Litteraturtidskrift* 1968:3, Bengt Landgren, *Ensamheten, döden och drömmarna* [Solitude, Death, and Dreams], Stockholm 1971, chap. 1, Anders Olsson, *Ekelöfs nej* [Ekelöf’s No], Stockholm 1983, chap. 1, and Sommar, chaps. 1 and 2. The fundamental cause is a life long aversion to his mother and a deep identification with a fallen father figure, a father who went insane and died when Ekelöf was eight years old.

repetitions, and with slightly surreal hues, the fundamental experience is varied in the text “eklips”:

when the time came the birds fell silent one by one and in the silence the people stopped and lifted their heads as if they expected someone. and darkness fell in the shadow of the sun, the shadow of the sun as an eyelid for the light and in the darkness the fateful influence of the stars became palpable. and darkness fell in the shadow of the sun or the dusk of a world without horizons whose fateful influence paralyzed nature which seemed to be listening for an invisible presence ... and darkness fell slowly in the shadow of the sun and the silence opened the five senses for the stars fateful influence while the condensed dusk slowly began to rain down on the sun's shadow like black snowflakes and paralyzed nature. but the darkness that the silence of the birds was waiting for merely grazed the earth with its wing only to disappear into the cosmos, and in the light everything once again became confusion.

Early on, Ekelöf felt not only like a stranger in the world (in his family, in Sweden, within European culture, and so on), but also like *a stranger in his native language*. He needed to rebuild his tattered relation to the Swedish language by taking a detour through French, the language of modernism *par excellence*. What the French – Mallarmé, Reverdy, Desnos – taught him was to symbolize estrangement in writing. With this, melancholy was set in motion.

After having been a dreamy melancholiac in the modern sense, the author of *sent på jorden*, with its “blue desires” and deep depressiveness, Ekelöf achieves a different distance to melancholy with the collection *Ferry Song / Färjesång* (1941), which he saw as a personal breakthrough.

One of the reasons for this new distance, which also included a new perspective on the “I,” the speaker in the poems, is a deepening of Ekelöf's interest in the Orient, primarily in Taoism. An additional, and perhaps poetically just as important precondition lies in the role of Edith Södergran in the new, impersonal concept of the Virgin and of power in the suite, “Write It Down” / “Tag och skriv,” which was part of the collection *Ferry Song*.⁸

In Södergran, Ekelöf could find not only a melancholy temperament that was close to his own, but also a similar, though more ecstatic and intentional strategy to “rise up from one’s ashes.”⁹ We see this in the poem “Maelstrom of Madness” / “Vanvettets virvel” in *The September Lyre*, 1919:

In your boat beware of superhuman currents,
the gaping maelstrom of madness –
in your boat beware of the jubilant waves in the descent.
They break asunder.
Beware – you are of no concern here –
life and death are one in the frenetic joy of power,
here there is no “slowly,” “carefully,” “try,”
Stronger hands grasp the oars in your escape.
There you stand, a hero with reborn blood.
Fascinated in the calm, a bonfire of joy on mirror-like ice,
as if death’s message were not written for you:
blissful waves lead your hull forward.¹⁰

Here, there is much of Ekelöf’s “Write it Down” in a condensed form. We have the most violent of antitheses: life and death, hot and cold. The bonfire on the mirror-like ice corresponds to Ekelöf’s “icecold in the shade, burning hot in the sun: the April of the soul.” The “I” of the poem, is also about to be

⁸ Södergran’s significance for Ekelöf is well known, and has been pointed out in many contexts by Ekelöf himself. See Brita Wigfors’s “Mellan riddaren och draken. Gunnar Ekelöfs ‘Tag och skriv’” [Between the Knight and the Dragon: Gunnar Ekelöf’s ‘Write it Down’] *Radix* 1980:3–4, for the emergence of the theme of the Virgin.

⁹ The lines in “Write it Down” run: “I rise from my ashes – a thinking emotional life / about to be swallowed by the formless billowing / I hover once again.” What has not been investigated is Ekelöf’s and Södergran’s kinship via a similar lack, or one prefers, starvation, which manifests itself in the need for something Ekelöf has referred to as “overcompensation”: “Who thinks of me as dependent on (influenced by) Södergran? No one, because Södergran is, essentially, nobody, in *that* market. The following however can be said, if someone were to come upon the idea that Södergran and I are equal, parallel. We have seen something like the same vision. We have also gone through something of the same crisis of overcompensation. For her, ‘the great hunter’ is Nietzsche. For me, Rimbaud and others, transposed in some collections from the ‘30s...” *Ensjälvbiografi* [An autobiography], p. 238.

¹⁰ *Selected poetry: bilingual edition*, Edith Södergran, transl. Theo Radic, Stockholm 2006.

swallowed up by the waves, by the impersonal powerplay of life and death: “Then, it is the power that is struggling, not you!” Ekelöf transforms Södergran’s “Beware – you no longer matter” to “You say ‘I’ and ‘it is about me’ / but it is about a what: / In reality, you are nobody.”

Ekelöf’s solution to the problem of melancholy is certainly not as manic and violently triumphant as Södergran’s.

He has no need of her transcendence, with its Nietzschean or Christian tones. The “I” of his poems is milder and more contemplative, “a shipwrecked man who pushed the dark shifting of forms forward.” But she has taught him the art of twisting oneself out of the gloom of the “I” of the poem and giving shape to the play of oppositions.

The ennobling transformation of melancholy – where cold is heat, and tears are precious stones – that Ekelöf associates with Södergran can be seen in the following late, unpublished note from the *Dīwān* period:

Södergran

I am crying, tears fall where I stand or go
frozen as grief
hot as the reddest seed of pomegranate
What kind of precious stones
are those tears
They are not genuine stones
Nor false
They are worthless
such that no one in the bazaars value
But anyone who knows anything about tears
has seen them cut on the beach¹¹

There is no doubt about Södergran’s great importance for Ekelöf’s style, not only in *Ferry Song*, but also in the *Dīwān* poems. Let us simply mention in this context the poem “I see you, distant, ascending out of the Sea of Smoke” in

11 Kladdbok 4A, p. 22. Handskriftsavdelningen, UUB.

Diwān, where Ekelöf directly refers back to the “Maelstrom of Madness.” Södergran’s words, “Stronger hands grasp the oars in your escape” are transformed to the following, in which the prince addresses the unknown maiden.

But You, Stranger
I strive to reach you
Row towards you
Like a man with only one oar
At the other gunwale perhaps
Someone stronger is pulling
In the struggle my hands lose their grip
The boat goes round and round
In the circles of Day and Night
But never do I lose my grip upon You.
You
Shall be my oar!¹²

This address to a “you” beyond the horizon of the “I” of the poem is a way to go beyond, if not to overcome, melancholy. If we return to *Ferry Song* – where the new address via the belief in the Virgin takes shape – we see how Ekelöf still unambiguously appears as, and regards himself as, a melancholiac. We witness this in no uncertain terms in the piece “Melancholia,” which is placed in a fugue before the intense final poem “Euphoria.”

In Ekelöf, melancholy is often euphoric, and euphoria melancholic, something for which we see evidence here, the same complex that could already be observed in Petrarch. Ekelöf’s mysticism of emptiness strengthens the relation of euphoria and melancholy, making it one of intensive involvement and an earnest entreaty such as in “Absentia animi.”

But in the poem “Melancholia,” he wanted, as a result of his having abandoned a previous romantic-modernist approach, to formulate a new equilibrium. The great military expedition, which is depicted here against

¹² “Diwān over the Prince of Emgión,” in *Selected Poems: Gunnar Ekelöf*, transl. W. H. Auden and Leif Sjöberg, Harmondsworth 1971, p. 24. For a comparison, see Anders Olsson, *Ekelöfs nej* [Ekelöf’s No], p. 258.

the background of Alexander's arrival at the Indus, is over. Everything has come to a liberating mode of either / or, to a neutralization of human desire, a neutralization of all "desert perspectives" and all "disquiet." The losses of the "I" of the poem are compared to that of the military commander's dead men, to the bleached "bones of the many cohorts' wishes, that had been mine ..." Now, the speaker in the poem only wants to be taken away by the waves "that divide and unite the lands left and never reached."

That there is no way back – "the great retreat" is said to have come to an end – means that the path of regression that Ekelöf had been following in *sent på jorden*, in for example the poem "cosmic sleepwalkers," with its search for a cosmic mother along the beaches of childhood, has passed. Melancholy acquires another, both more everyday and ascetic meaning. It is proclaimed in the Latin title as a well-known state of disillusionment. And yet the melancholic beseeching isn't entirely gone. There is a very strong desire to rest and be rocked to a state of tranquility by the waves, which are allowed to take on the role of the mother. To be rocked "is all I want," we read, to be rocked as *dead branches*, wreckage of *burned ships* or *charred* and *burned* bodies – all without question images of a manifest melancholy in the middle of the clear-sightedness.

If we then take yet another leap forward in time, to *Diwān about the Prince Emgión* from 1965, something very odd has happened. Although the abstract invocation of melancholy has not finished playing its role, as is shown in Song 27, "The Black Picture of Silver Kissed to Pieces," oppositions have been sharpened and intensified to such an extent that one might wonder whether we are at all dealing with melancholy anymore. Here, there are no blue, infinite wishes like those in *sent på jorden*, no abandoned wishes of one's cohorts as in *Ferry Song*, but rather *wishes that have been kissed to pieces*, destroying themselves. Both the melancholy of Romanticism and of disillusionment seem to have passed in favor of a more active "I," which makes room for a simpler, more powerful writing style.

Gunnar Ekelöf has also referred to his late position as epicurean – rather than romantic or "ascetic." "In fact, this at once intellectual and sensual and religious position is nothing other than a continuation of the teaching of

Epicurus, which I revere. To set place lay his matter on nothing, in his sense, is to look for the true salve of the soul.”¹³ After his mother’s death in the fall of 1961 and his inspired *Dīwān* poetry in 1965, Ekelöf appears to have turned into a furious and proud rebel with a freer relationship to his origins.

What is reminiscent of Kafka in this new position is that Ekelöf chooses to speak through the prince of Emgión, the one who, in *Dīwān*, is a true hunger artist who proclaims “No! Between your breasts, that never run dry / I want to place my head / in hunger!” With this, melancholy is on the verge of being transcended. As a text, Ekelöf’s *Dīwān* poetry is hardly melancholic, either in the classical or the modern sense. Its language is marvelously clear and simple and is obviously related to orthodox hymns. It plays in a new way with different roles, it is polyphonic, doesn’t contain as much unison as previous collections. At the same time, it is more direct in a nearly childish way, more powerful and more sublime than his melancholic texts.

How did Ekelöf arrive at this point?

It is likely safe to assume that the signs of the solution that are manifest here were in Ekelöf’s poetry early on. All of his efforts can be seen as a ceaseless attempt to restore a disturbed maternal relationship. He writes in the spirit of the Virgin, the son-less mother figure who can heal because she is beyond all combative desires and all earthly food. But at the same time, he writes in the shadow of the eclipse, the darkened sun, and thus in the shadow of the disturbed father figure connected to this. Only in the late poetical work does he have enough strength to array himself directly in the shape of the fallen angel, Lucifer – while at the same time the image of the mother becomes much more clearly separated from the infantile desires of the “I.” The mother is merciful precisely because she does *not* give.

¹³ *En självbiografi*, p. 192. [The three verbs in a row without punctuation are rendered as they are in the original: *sätta ställa lägga*. -Translator]

No, the Merciful He, the Merciful She
give no bread, give no breast, give no water
No night-lodging no marriage-bed
She does not give, she cannot give
And in this she is honest
The Merciful She gives what she does not give
What she could not or would not give

The Gift is called Distance
You who are strong in love
You were there
And passed quietly by.
Dīwān, Song 10 ¹⁴

The separation is a fact, while the apotheosis reaches a new intensity in the hunger for another nourishment beyond all entangling ties. Precisely like Edith Södergran, Ekelöf is looking for a food beyond food, a border-transcending non-being beyond our senses and concepts. And the prince can be satisfied by ordinary earthly food just as little as Kafka's hunger artist in his cage can be:

My heart is a famished child
between my ribs
a child in a cage, certainly
they bring me a piece of bread
between the bars

I have not reached out my hand
I have not received any
of love
I eat my hunger for you
I satisfy my hunger with hunger
Is that your view
That shall be my Intention
Dīwān, Song 9

Ekelöf now delves down to an even more primitive level in his writing than previously, he knows what sort of outlet for his own neglected, infantile wishes his negative image of the mother has constituted in his emotional world. Melancholy filled out an empty space, an empty mouth. Now he denies it access in the midst of the ever-flowing breasts of the god of motherhood with a powerful – No! He forces himself to deny that which he affirms, and it is precisely in this negating way that he can move closer to the mother in a new way.

Panayía, take distance from me
from me who is looking for you!
Know that I am looking for you only
as a never connected child
or a never weaned –

No! Between your breasts never gone dry
I would like to lay my head
starving!
Are you Alone, without son
I shall also be alone.
Dīwān, Song 4

There is no doubt that Ekelöf has achieved something unparalleled with this late work. The aspect that has been selected here, the overcoming of a deeply rooted melancholy that had characterized the earlier work, is interesting in that it sharpens the significance of the mother's death. Now, another "I" is able to speak in Ekelöf's poetry, more nakedly, more unservedly. As an eager child, in a poem from the unpublished works, the "I" stretches his hand towards the Madonna in the picture, but she simply takes him by the hair and shakes his head – "get out of the picture"! He understands that he has exceeded the bounds of the permissible, and in

14 W.H Auden and Leif Sjöberg, p. 33.

the end, he places all his hopes at the foot of her picture: "like a tattered little wooden box."¹⁵



- 15 The poem is printed in Ekner's edition of Ekelöfs *Skrifter*, Stockholm 1990, vol. 3, p. 178f. and in its entirety runs:

Jag vågade se upp på bilden av dig
jag vågade sträcka fram handen
till bön för barmhärtighet
Sedan böjde jag huvudet
och ur bilden
sträcktes din hand
tog mig i håret
och skakade om mitt huvud
Jag förstod: jag fick icke önska
mer än mig tilläts
Jag skulle vilja beskriva
detta som jag önskade
Jag såg att du hade återtagit ditt oföränderliga leende
och din makt över mig
Jag lägger alla mina önskningar
vid foten av din bild
som en trasig liten ask av trä

I dared to look up at your image
I dared to reach out my hand
as a supplication for mercy
Then I bowed my head
and from the picture
your hand reached out
took me by the hair
and shook my head
I understood: I was not allowed to wish
more than is permitted me
I wanted to describe
that for which I wished
I saw that you had resumed your immutable smile
and your power over me
I place all my hopes
at the foot of your image
like a tattered little box of wood

VIII. The Sacrifice

Kafka and in his later years, Ekelöf, move out beyond the borders of melancholy. It is perhaps for this reason that they can point to the causes and preconditions of melancholy with such authority: the increasingly diminishing and less visible domination of Kafka by the law of the father, or the position of the sacrificial victim assumed by Ekelöf, which contains traces of the political and ritual violence that has been a part of human culture since its very beginnings. Ekelöf writes, in an unpublished draft of the *Dīwān* work:

We must all be sacrificed
red, white, brown and blue
For whom,
For what,

Not for a pious
but for a cannibalistic humanity
Whom did you sacrifice for
You who deprived me of my vision
with glowing needles¹

Melancholy's fundamental, tragic aspect comes into focus. The Hamlet theme – the identification with the mad, fallen father who, after his death, continues

¹ Kladdbok [Notebook / sketchbook] 4A, p. 35. Handskriftsavdelningen [Handwriting Department], Uppsala University Library.

to haunt the son – or the Oedipus theme – the act of blinding, perceptible everywhere, which is strengthened and dramatized in the late poetic efforts – shades and gives meaning to the whole of Ekelöf's work. There is nothing particularly odd about the existence of a dialogue between the melancholiac and the heroes of classical tragedy who were crushed by fate, but is there an anthropological basis for the link that exists between melancholy, ritual sacrifice, and cannibalism?

In fact, the existence of precisely such a link was the thesis of Freud's *Totem und Tabu* from 1913, the highly controversial and bold outline of a general theory of culture rooted in the Oedipus Complex. Generally speaking, Freud's disciples and more recent psychoanalysts and anthropologists have given the work, with its brutally forthright idea of an actual patricide lying at the root of culture, a chilly reception, but it is worth remembering that it was Freud's own favorite work, and that it was, among all his works, the one that indisputably made the greatest impression on the Freud enthusiast Thomas Mann, among others.²

What Freud contended in the book's four essays was that there is a deep, not merely metaphoric, connection between the psychic disorders that he had detected among his patients and the highly ambivalent patterns of behavior which are characteristic of both classical tragedy and primitive cultures. Freud based his ideas primarily on results from the dynamic English anthropology of the late 19th century. In neurotics, he believed he saw traces of the sorts of prohibitions which had been explicit in archaic cultures, as well as having been necessary for the very survival of these cultures. Freud wanted to understand neuroses as anti-social formations that were attempts, at the individual level, to cope with what society had failed to manage. Above all, Freud probably saw an analogy between the obsessional neurotic's fear of being touched and the primitive man's fear of coming close to the taboo object, which marked out the sacred, tribal totem, or the sacrificed deity.

2 See Freud, *Studienausgabe*, vol. IX, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 289. – As for the dismissive attitude of later anthropologists, see Lévi-Strauss's detailed critique of the concept of totemism, though also his expansion and formalization of it, in *Totemism*, transl. Rodney Needham, Boston 1971. He claims here that "totemism concerns the same thing that hysteria does," p. 2. The criticism of Freud's *Totem und Tabu* is on p. 69.

The two prohibitions that operate, either openly or covertly, in both modern madness as well as in the primitive community, are the prohibition against incest and the prohibition against touching or even nearing the dead. Anthropologists have described the abhorrence manifest in the demonization of the dead observed in primitive tribes, which according to Freud is related to the absence of the idea of a natural death: all death was evil, to be regarded as a lethal act that must be atoned for. To guard against the revenge of the dead, the dead were isolated and made taboo. This also served to protect against the ghosts that might come back to haunt the tribe. Ghosts or demons were understood to be spirits who had recently died, and Freud points out that what happens in the so-called work of mourning is precisely the elimination of demons.³

Freud's theory in *Totem und Tabu* is straightforward. The demon is the haunting father, the one who in a distant prehistory was murdered by the group. And "an evil impulse – a death wish – towards the beloved person is always at the basis of the formation of a prohibition."⁴ The notion of the group here, or a collectivity, is related to Darwin's idea of a non-hierarchical primal horde of rival brothers, who, in Freud, gang up against a tyrannical father figure who has a sexual monopoly. This patricide is the first act, the genesis of culture and religion. The guilt, which binds together the collectivity around the deceased, requires the creation of rituals of purification and atonement. The deceased becomes the center of a cult; he is sanctified. As Freud puts it: "At bottom, God is nothing but an exalted father."⁵

By means of this act, the primal horde is united into a community based on the two prohibitions mentioned above: the prohibition against incest (which in Freud is the prohibition against making love with one's mother, a prohibition without which society would perish because of divisive rivalries) and the prohibition against killing (which in Freud is the prohibition against killing or humiliating the father). To be effective, the murder must be repeated regularly, and this must take place collectively and in a strictly regulated manner. This is the function of the sacrificial rite, as it is presented by

3 *Totem und Tabu*, Frankfurt am Main 1973 (1913), p. 72.

4 Ibid. p. 78. (1960)

5 Ibid. p. 150f. (1960)

anthropologists such as James Frazer and Robertson Smith – Freud’s most important sources.

In his studies of Semitic tribal societies, Robertson Smith saw that the killing of the sacrificial victim would undoubtedly have been a crime had it been carried out by an individual member of the tribe: it could only be legitimized if the whole group bore the responsibility and, as a group, jointly carried out the deed. “This was the point of the old Hebrew form of execution, where the criminal was stoned by the entire community.”⁶

The tribe is a community based on blood that is rooted in the sacrifice of an animal that is of one and the same flesh. To slaughter the animal is, therefore, to shed the blood of the tribe itself. The tribe kills and sanctifies the victim simply in order to be strengthened and continue to exist as a group.

This functional approach to the act of sacrifice is not the only thing Freud makes use of in Smith. Robertson Smith is also the one who provides the link to cannibalism and the sacred meal. As he is able to show in a number of cases, the actual eating of the sacrificial animal is connected to the killing of it, the killing has its counterpart in the shared repast. Freud writes that “the binding force of the meal is not a religious moment, but the act itself of eating.”⁷ For Freud, the totemic animal is a father substitute, and, in fact, the first act, the murder, is accompanied by a second, less commonly noted act: the eating of the father. “One day the expelled brothers joined forces, slew and devoured the father, thus putting an end to the father horde.”⁸ And further: “That they also would eat the dead is obvious for the cannibalistic savage.”⁹

In point of fact, this accompanying act is indispensable for an understanding of the more sublimated and cultivated forms of mental appropriation that we are accustomed to associating with psychoanalysis. Freud writes the following: “Now, they accomplished their identification with him by devouring him and each acquired a part of his strength. The totem feast, which is perhaps humanity’s first holiday, would be the repetition and commemoration

⁶ Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*, London 1894, p. 285.

⁷ *Totem und Tabu*, p. 139, “... das Bindende an der gemeinsamen Mahlzeit nicht ein religiöses Moment ist, sondern, der Akt des Essens selbst.”

⁸ Ibid. p. 145.

⁹ Ibid. p. 146.

of this momentous, criminal act with which so many things began – social organizations, moral restrictions, and religion.”¹⁰ Just as religion is based on an actual murder, which is sanctified in the community, identification – which is inseparable from the development of the individual and of culture – rests on an actual act of consumption.

But the archaic remnants that exist in modern times can by no means only be found in the more or less insane patients in Freud’s private practice. We can see them to some degree almost everywhere. These original acts have been kept sacred in annual celebrations, holidays involving abstinence, festivals or saturnalia. But not only that: the totem feast, which as Freud puts it may well be humanity’s first holiday, is characterized in all its various forms not only by a *permitted*, but by a *mandated* excess and by a transgression of the otherwise immalleable prohibitions. He writes that “in the very nature of the holiday lies excess.”¹¹

But what happens when these prohibitions, which are also at work in the ritual celebrations in a reversed form, begin to be called into question, as in classical tragedy? Freud’s question at the end of *Totem und Tabu* is precisely this: “Why did the tragic hero have to suffer, what /.../ is the essential content of a tragedy?”¹² Freud’s response is as terse as it is inventive: “He had to suffer because he was the primal father, the hero of that great, primordial tragedy, which here finds a tendentious repetition, and the tragic guilt is the guilt which he had to take upon himself in order to relieve the chorus of its guilt.”¹³

For Freud, then, the tragic hero would be identical with the Primal Father, with the sacrificed sovereign prince, while the chorus embodies the guilt-ridden collectivity. But it is not only the position of the suffering victim taken on by the hero that anticipates the future situation of the melancholiac. He, like the melancholiac, was forced to pose questions concerning his fate and the cultural prohibitions he ran up against, something that exacted a great toll.

One could say the following: the tragic hero, and later the modern melancholiac, are, not only with respect to their genre but also as culturally specific

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 146.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 144.

¹² Ibid. p. 158.

¹³ Ibid. p. 159.

types, outside the public opinion, outside *doxa* – next to, not part of, the chorus, or the collective celebration. We have seen this before: the melancholiac does not eat, or *if* he eats, it is compulsive and doesn't involve any participation in a collective meal – be it sacred or carnivalesque. Now, it is not so certain that the tragic hero is identical to the Primal Father, as Freud claims. In fact, the Oedipus and Hamlet dramas – which belong to the canonical writings of psychoanalysis – are thought rather to focus on the absence of the father, where the hero is a son who is grieving and investigating alarming crimes, which he himself or someone close to him has committed. As René Girard has pointed out in his important work on sacrificial cults, *La violence et le sacré*, from 1973, it is remarkable that Freud, who, in *Totem und Tabu*, wants to make the Oedipus complex the basis for a comprehensive theory of culture, with an explicit reference to the tragic hero of the ancient drama, *never actually discusses the Oedipus drama itself*.¹⁴

Girard proposes that the hypothesis about the actual patricide should be eliminated, which would make the idea of the primal horde more reasonable instead of being a caricature of modern family life, dominated by a tyrannical father figure.¹⁵

The question is whether one can make the relation established by Freud in his speculative writing between modern psychic life and archaic violence in the sacrificial cult even sharper. The important thing for us is that *Totem und Tabu* – as well as Ekelöf's late writings – provides us with a link, via tragedy, among the primitive sacrificial cult, cannibalism, and melancholy. On yet another point, which concerns tragedy as an art form, we have reason to follow Girard's critique of Freud. He sees, quite correctly, Oedipus's suffering as vicarious, but it is difficult to understand why one should exonerate him completely. Like the others in Sophocles's drama, Oedipus is, at first, participating in the pursuit of a guilty party. The relationship between those doing the sacrificing and the sacrificial victim appears to involve a far more complicated, ambiguous *interrelationship* than Freud is willing to admit.¹⁶

As regards the origin of the incest prohibition, some have questioned

¹⁴ *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore 1979 (1973), s. 208f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 193.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 77f.

whether it really is a likely consequence of patricide. According to Freud, the prohibition was introduced for the sensible reason that without it, society would disintegrate because of internal strife and rivalry. This is an unconvincing rationalization: why couldn't the tribal community be conceived as capable of disintegrating into violence either way, if the primary sexual impulse were as strong as Freud assumed?¹⁷

There are thus a number of reasons to reformulate Freud's hypothesis, though one wouldn't have to alter the ritual starting point and its connections to later cultural phenomena. The advantage with Freud, from our standpoint, is that his hypothesis, despite its audaciousness, has a high degree of complexity; moreover, he linked the idea of the violent primal act to an understanding of the significance of eating in the collective rite.

This combination of collective violence and eating in the sacrificial cult is no mere loose speculation on the part of Freud, the amateur anthropologist. Frazer's and Robertson Smith's observations, on which Freud based his ideas, have since been revised, but also, with impressive erudition, confirmed and further developed by the Swiss anthropologist Walter Burkert. This is seen first in the work that became an instant classic, *Homo necans*, from 1983, which contained a number of interrelated studies of ancient Greek sacrificial rites and myths.

Burkert's thesis is that religious man, *homo religiosus*, "acts and reaches self-consciousness as *homo necans*," that is, via a person who kills as part of a sacrificial cult.¹⁸ Since the ritual is older than myth and religion, it is a key to the earliest formation of culture, with traces going far back into the Paleolithic period. The ritual consistently takes the form of a sacrificial rite based on a strictly regulated, collective killing followed by a shared meal. Like Freud, Burkert asserts that culture starts with an act of violence that becomes ritualized, that is to say, is repeated in the community, and that then acquires a symbolic form.¹⁹ In the Greek ritual sacrifices Burkert studied, this form has three components.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 213.

¹⁸ *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1983 (1972), p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 22.

First there are the initial, purifying rites; a virgin often leads the sacrificial procession and carries the basket that contains the knife, covered in grains of corn, that will be used to kill the sacrificial animal. Water and grains of corn are thrown on the sacrificial animal, the altar, and the ground. This is followed by the dramatic act of killing, accompanied by a cry, “Ololygé,” in terror or triumph. As a third aspect, there are the purifying and concluding acts, and the restorative celebration with the shared meal, in which the participants consume all of the sacrificial animal except the bile and bones. The climax of the ritual is the act of killing and the pervasive cry. Burkert writes: “The essence is always the experience of death brought about by human violence, which here in turn is subject to inherent laws. And this experience is almost always connected to another human /.../ act, namely eating: the banquet that includes those who have been involved in the sacred.”²⁰

This dramatic form is reflected in Greek burial customs. We can see for example how the festive burial meal after the death of Patroclus in the *Iliad* must be immediately preceded by a ritual killing in which “the blood that flowed around the deceased could be poured with a pail.”²¹

Of course, there are important differences between Burkert’s and Freud’s views on the nature of the sacrificial rite. Burkert, with his enormous amount of research material, can never accept the idea of *just one* act of killing as determinative for the emergence of culture. It would never have been able to acquire the formative significance that it has had according to Freud. We must imagine a much longer evolutionary process. Like Girard, he also points out that “patricide presupposes the existence of paternity and paternally based social forms, even though both are specifically human, civilized innovations.”²²

But most important is perhaps the claim that Freud, like Girard, commits the error, typical of our time, of tracing everything back to the psyche or the internal aspects of human behavior. He fails to note the importance for survival of the killing of animals or humans. The archaic period we are talking about here, and which made killing the basis of the first cultural order, was a time when Australian primates killed and ate baboons, they sometimes even

20 Ibid. p. 12.

21 *The Iliad*, Song 23 l. 34.

22 *Homo necans*, p. 74.

ate their own offspring as well.²³ This was a time when the hunt was fundamental, and where internal aggression was transferred to the quarry. But as Burkert points out, this had consequences that are similar to Freud's conclusions about patricide. The goal was not simply to kill and destroy the quarry, but to bring it home as a trophy, to elevate and esteem it. This exaltation often weaves the father figure into Greek ritual sacrifices, where the father can be moved in the "comedy of innocence," Burkert's name for the initial phase of the rite. The father acquires a greater and greater symbolic importance in the development of society, and will assume the proportions Freud attributed to him in religious and social institutions.²⁴

Fundamental to the development of culture is continuity and stability. This is in large measure the achievement of the rite, however paradoxical that might seem. "That which shall endure and be effective has to pass through a sacrificial animal that opens up, only then to once again cover over, the abyss of annihilation."²⁵

At a couple of points, Burkert gives intriguing hints about the relationship between melancholy and non-eating. The rules for the sacrificial meal were extraordinarily strict. As soon as the animal had been killed, all internal aggressiveness had to cease. This was accomplished by means of a prohibition against eating, in rites that would generate much anxiety and guilt. A very widespread rule was that anyone who carries out the sacrifice and does the actual killing must abstain from food. And this applied not only to human beings. Even Hermes, who ritually killed livestock, needed to comply with this rule.²⁶ In some rites, the knife was thrown into the sea. The one who did the deed and the instrument with which the deed was done are sullied with guilt and need to be banished. Connected with the killing was thus the escape and disappearance of the one who did the killing. For the collective celebration to come about, the violence upon which it is based must not be repeated or acted out, but removed and covered over.²⁷

²³ Ibid. p. 74f.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 75.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 38.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 38.

²⁷ See here *Totem und Tabu*, p. 141, on how guilt is assigned to the one doing the killing, and thereafter to the knife used in the sacrifice.

Is there any connection between the melancholiac who does not eat and the officiator at the sacrifice, who kills the sacrificial animal, and who himself becomes a sort of sacrificial lamb so that he not besmirch the collectivity and its holy repast?

On another point as well, Burkert gives us quite a bit to think about. Paleolithic man killed and ate not just animals, but also people: “from the dawn of history, people again and again yielded to cannibalism.”²⁸ And long before the Greeks developed their cannibalistic myths about how, for example Thyestes, the Peloponnesian, unknowingly ate his own children, which his rival brother Atreus had murdered and served him for dinner, there were many different sacrificial rites with elements of cannibalism, such as the Lykaia in Arcadia, devoted to the cult of Zeus, in the form of a wolf. These rituals exhibit peculiar and frightening hybrids, where it is difficult to distinguish between humans and animals. In the cult, there could be a moment of risk of eating human flesh, which made the culprit crazy and forced him out into the wilderness. The anthropologist must but confirm that archaic Greek culture is full of wolfmen – just as archaic African culture has manifested traces of murderous leopardmen – but also werewolves, which later came to be part of the vocabulary of Greek medicine, and to which psychoanalysis refers, as we have seen.²⁹

“Marcellos from Sidon treated cases of ‘lycanthropy’ as a kind of mental illness, a particular form of melancholy, with blood-letting as the only cure. He was aware of patients who ‘ran around at night and mimicked wolves and dogs in every way and for the most part kept to cemeteries until dawn.’ Their bones usually bore scars from dog bites. Curiously, these outbreaks recurred with great regularity, according to the almanac, in February, the month of the wolf. Thus, even during late antiquity, this so-called mental illness was ritually regulated.”³⁰

It is possible that, at this time, the ritual included both madness and its cure. When medicine takes the form of science, the rite has already lost its foothold, and madness therewith loses its socially organized expression as

²⁸ *Homo necans*, p. 18.

²⁹ See chap. IV above on the psychoanalytic discussion of lycanthropy, p. 58f.

³⁰ *Homo necans*, p. 89.

well. *Melancholy* as a term is used here explicitly for those who have been ritually mixed with the sacrificial animal, just as those who eat of the tribe's sacrificed totem become one with it. But the melancholiac is alone, he has transgressed a boundary which seems to correspond to the boundary between eating and non-eating. As the officiator at the sacrifice, he has by his very deed been contaminated by the sacrificial animal and must be expelled from the community. He is the dog or wolf, but only during the strictly delineated time when the dog or the wolf is sacrificed in the celebration of the Lupercalia ritual in February.³¹

For this reason, we should once again address the question of the relation of the melancholiac to eating via the social rite to which he clearly stands in a deeply problematic relationship. It is fruitful to do this with the help of the ingenious critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who, perhaps more than any one else, has stressed the continuity and passing down of archaic popular rites in European and Russian literature, from Rabelais to Dostoevsky. For our purposes, what's important about Bakhtin are his attempts, particularly in the large study of Rabelais, to distil out a universal philosophy of the word, qua food and dialogic participation, from that which appears to be the third phase of the classical rite: a popular culture of laughter that has a material basis. He repeatedly invokes annual rites and carnivals that coincide with the ecclesiastical year, and that turn the rigidly hierarchical forms of established religion inside out.

This popular celebratory culture passes on among other things the legacy of the ancient saturnalia, one of the Roman peoples' favorite festivals, which in poets such as Virgil and Ovid came to be connected with the legend of the fertility god Saturn's Golden Age in Roman prehistory. The "essence" of the carnival "was expressed and experienced most clearly in the Roman saturnalia, which were understood as the true and complete, if transient, return of Saturn's Golden Age on Earth."³²

In light of Rabelais and these carnivalesque rites, Bakhtin formulates a collective apotheosis of celebration and eating, in an open polemic against all pessimistic or individual-oriented philosophy. "Melancholy and food are

³¹ On the February Roman Lupercalia ritual, see Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Die Korndämonen*, 1868.

³² *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1968 (1965), p. 7f.

incompatible," he maintains.³³ Anxiety has no deeper "existential" relevance, as in Kierkegaard or Heidegger.³⁴ In the feast, "man is not afraid of the world, he has conquered it, and eats it."³⁵

What is of fundamental interest here is how Bakhtin bases his antimelancholic philosophy of language and life on a collective eating in ritually recurring forms.

It is nonetheless obvious that, if we look more closely into the rites that Bakhtin dwells on, we see that these too involve sacrifice: often a king who is raised up only to be brutally overthrown and cut into pieces in a way characteristic of Rabelais's grotesque manner of writing.³⁶ This is consistent with the traditional meaning of the saturnalia rite: it was a December celebration, one that celebrated the fall of one world so that another could be born.

Bakhtin would prefer not to see this sacrifice, or more precisely: his own theory of celebratory, universal eating presupposes and produces the sacrificial victims it does not want to know about. He does not see the god Saturn's other, cannibalistic face, a face which, however, is very much present in Rabelais, who is always playing with the oppositions that are present in the ritual: fasting and voracity, religious seriousness and childish extravagance, like in the passage where Gargantua eats six pilgrims with salad:

The pilgrims who in this way ended up in his mouth, attempted, as best as possible, to keep away from the millstones of his teeth and thought that they had been thrown into an underground dungeon, and when Gargantua drank the big gulp, they thought that they would drown in his mouth, and the current of wine came close to pulling them with him into the abyss of his stomach; nevertheless they positioned themselves

³³ Ibid. p. 283.

³⁴ Of course, it is extremely important in Kierkegaard's case to distinguish between anxiety and melancholy, a distinction that loses some of its relevance for Bakhtin. For Kierkegaard, anxiety is a path to a deeper, religious insight; melancholy, quite the opposite. For the scholastics or for Luther, it was a serious sin, indeed, the most serious one could possibly imagine: the loss of "religious fortitude," of the ability to feel deeply and ardently, which is the mother of all sin. See Obermüller, p. 39f.

³⁵ Bakhtin, p. 296.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 197ff.

next to the row of teeth by making a long leap with the help of their pilgrim's staffs, as the pilgrims who made pilgrimages to Mont-Saint-Michel are accustomed to doing.³⁷

Without a doubt, we have here a popular utopia in the spirit of an unbounded cannibalistic eating, in constant opposition to asceticism, which, for example is personified by Quarêmeprenant on the island of Tapinois which Pantagruel visits: "You will see nothing there /.../ but a tall woundy swallower of hot Wardens and Muscles, a great hypocrite, a real miser who sells hay in bundles, an emaciated giant with some piteous down on his chin and a double-tonsure, home from the Lantern Land, a great nattering gossip hound, standard bearer of the fish-eaters, an alderman of mustard, a flogger of small children, a great calciner of ashes, thanks to the adverse effects on health of fasting, father and foster father of doctors, a wallower in indulgences, absolution, and penitences, an honest man and a good Catholic of great piety. For three forths of the day, He weeps. He never participates in a wedding. But it is true that he is the most industrious maker of larding sticks and skewers that might be found in forty kingdoms ... His only food is salted coat of mail, salted helmets, salted head pieces and salted spiked helmets."³⁸

What is important in Rabelais is the quantity, the mass, the physical abundance. Everything is food, wealth, and transitoriness. The position of the ascetic or the melancholiac is here clearly defined as an island in the midst of being, which at any time will be washed over and drowned in its wake, just as the pilgrims are about to drown when Gargantua takes a swig of wine.

The people, the ones who laugh, are also the ones who eat. And they eat and laugh with open mouths, by keeping the passage between the external and internal open in an eternal cycle. But it is a metabolism that assumes – and gives the impression that – everything can be digested in the large stomach, to which tradition also belongs.

But the constant presence in Rabelais of the carnivalesque rite makes it clear that this eating without question requires a sacrifice. According to

³⁷ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, transl. M. A. Screech, London 2006, p. 323. [Translation modified. - Translator]

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 751. [Translation modified. -Translator]

Burkert's scheme: first comes the sacrifice, then the sacred banquet; the apotheosis "is always preceded by death."³⁹ And further: "death is overcome when the mourner becomes the one who kills" and represses and overcomes the sacrificial act in the celebration.⁴⁰ In Rabelais's case, the oppositions, such as that between asceticism and voracity, are of course encoded in the Christian tradition, in which the rite – as in so many cultures – is preceded by a long period of fasting.⁴¹

When all is said and done, it might be that these opposites are anthropologically inseparable, that they must be regarded as two radically different aspects of one and the same phenomenon. The tragic and the comic, the melancholic and the cannibalistic, are extremes with one and the same origin. Part of the evidence for this is that the carnivals so closely follow the ecclesiastical year with its liturgies and symbols, and are partly produced by men of the Church. One of the versions of the very popular parody *Coena Cypriani*, which fully emphasizes the drinking and feasting in the Bible, was written by the abbot of Fulda, Rabanus Maurus, in the 9th century.⁴² To a large extent, the church sanctioned the "excesses" of the celebration that Freud talks about in *Totem und Tabu*.

What, then, is the nature of the transition between the sacred meal in the archaic sacrificial rite – the "totem sacrament" that Robertson Smith spoke of and that Frazer later sought to confirm⁴³ – and the Christian communion? The continuity between these two phenomena is of the utmost importance for Freud's theory in *Totem und Tabu*, and, as we shall see, it becomes important to thinkers of our own time, when the Communion acquires a *speculative* meaning. The central passage in *Totem und Tabu* is the following:

A son-religion displaced the father-religion. As a sign of this substitution the ancient totem feast was revived in the form of communion, in which the company of brothers consumed the flesh and blood of the son, no

³⁹ *Homo necans*, p. 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 53.

⁴¹ Robertson Smith, p. 434f.

⁴² Bakhtin, p. 288.

⁴³ Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, London 1910, p. 120.

longer the father, obtained sanctity thereby, and identified themselves with him. Thus we can follow through the ages the identity of the totem feast with animal sacrifice, with theanthropic human sacrifice and with Christian Holy Communion and we can recognize in all these celebrations the traces of the crime by which men were so deeply weighed down but of which they must nonetheless feel so proud. The Christian communion, however, is essentially a fresh elimination of the father, a repetition of the guilty deed. We can see the full justice of Frazer's pronouncement that "the Christian communion has absorbed within itself a sacrament which is undoubtedly far older than Christianity."⁴⁴



44 *Totem und Tabu*, p. 157f. Studienausgabe, vol. IX. p. 437.

IX. Speculative Communion

It is said that Rainer Maria Rilke once succeeded in reciting one of his *Duineser Elegien* in such a vivid way that the audience had no difficulties whatsoever immediately absorbing the poem. His voice transformed the complex linguistic work into a completely transparent corpus. But when the audience later returned to the same poem, this time in written form, the sense of comprehensibility had vanished. The transparency of the voice had been changed into an impenetrable jumble of letters.

Hans-Georg Gadamer cites this anecdote as an illustration of his hermeneutic thesis on the precedence of the spoken over the written word.¹ The voice is closer to the actual meaning than the immobile mass of letters in written language. The voice need hardly be interpreted, since it constitutes the very medium of the comprehensible. The voice interprets itself, so to speak: "All writing is, as we have said, a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning. Because the meaning is subjected in writing to a sort of self-alienation, this process of transforming it back is the actual hermeneutic task. /.../ The spoken word interprets itself in an astonishing way, by its manner of speaking, its tone, its tempo, and so on."² The first task of hermeneutics is to extract the original meanings of the written characters, the actual meaning that finds expression in the living voice.

¹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen 1960, p. 371 n 2.

² Ibid. p. 371.

In this chapter we will examine what perhaps could be called an *a priori* of the *mouth*, or of *eating*, in the West. The fixation on the oral that psychoanalysis has studied in relation to melancholy has left its mark on completely different discourses and aspects of culture: the ingestion that takes place in the Christian Holy Communion can be traced back, as Freud pointed out, to primitive ritual sacrifices, but also lives on, via Christian hermeneutics, in speculative philosophy. The dominance in philosophy of the mouth not only manifests itself as *phonocentrism*, but, as we shall see, it also is manifest in the notion of reading and interpretation as a sublimated eating.

Faith in the precedence of orality over the written text dominates Western philosophy from the Platonic dialogues to Edmund Husserl's views on the subject's internal monologue as the true medium of meaning. Nowhere is this phonocentrism as clear as in Hegel's philosophy, where it takes on the form of an oral complex of a both philosophical and physiological nature. Here, the mouth is not, as it was in Rabelais, a materializing organ, but rather an idealizing organ – the passage between internal and external, between subject and world, a passage not towards the earthly and common man, but towards increasingly higher orders of truth. Here, it is not just the food digested in the organism that is incorporated, but also the mouth, which is the dwelling place of the idealizing voice. In the spoken word, the subject finds immediate expression: "The voice is what lies closest to thought, for it is here that pure subjectivity becomes an object."³ By means of the mouth, thoughts are exteriorized to external sounds, to words that sublate themselves the very moment they are pronounced. Unlike the dead text, whose markings remain even when no one understands them anymore, the voice corresponds to the ideality of thought. Thought passes through the mouth out into an empirical space, but the voice annihilates itself – the words are canceled out in the same instant they are articulated, thereby retaining their ideal character.

The written text, however, is fixed in external, worldly existence. The written sign is not immediately available for the thinking subject, but constitutes – as

³ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (henceforth: *Enz.*), Theorie-Werkausgabe, vol. 8–10, Frankfurt am Main 1969 §351, *Zusatz*.

Gadamer puts it – an “alienation” of the living voice. The text must be interiorized and given life. The dead letters must be assimilated and interpreted via a hermeneutic act, in order thus to be “transformed back into speech and meaning.” This, too, is thought to take place via the mouth – hermeneutics is oral.

Hegel is more explicit on this point than his modern successors. Gadamer speaks of assimilation and *Verschmelzung*, Hegel, of eating. In *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* there are a number of interesting notes about the “oral system” and the dual function of the mouth. Hegel writes of the transition from internal to external, and from external to internal – the incorporation of external substance, and the expression of the internal: the mouth “has the dual function of initiating the transformation of food into an aspect of the living animal organism, and, in contrast to this interiorizing of the outer, of completing the objectification of subjectivity, a process that occurs via the voice.”⁴ It is in the voice that spirit finds expression. Written words, if they are truly to be understood, must be incorporated and transformed into internal life – they must become voice. Hegel understands this assimilation, as we shall see, analagous to the ingestion of food.

Nowhere is this idea of the precedence of the oral over the written as clear as in the young Hegel’s religious-philosophical texts, his speculative readings of Judaism and Christianity. Here, the disparagement of the written text runs parallel to the criticism of fetishism and idolatry. To be sure, the written sign has a positive aspect: like a cell in the honeycomb of the bee, the letter preserves “the honey of reason” – everyone can take in the written word and gain access to spiritual sweetness. But the written text also constitutes a danger, and this is the argument that leads to a condemnation of the written word. The dead body of the sign emancipates itself from the living order of meanings and makes claims to independence. The dead sign is transformed into a fetish: “And we have seen how an innocent thing, the style of writing itself, quickly degenerates in the hands of man, and becomes idolatry.”⁵ The corpse is emptied of honey. What remains are dead marks on dry parchment.

⁴ Ibid. § 401, *Zusatz*.

⁵ Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, Berlin 1783, p. 83. As far as the perspective on writing is concerned, Hegel concurs with his predecessor here.

In Hegel, the introduction of writing means a degradation of religion. The fetishists of writing – the Jewish priesthood – want to make the divine mystery accessible in a resolute form, but they thereby pervert the true worship of the sacred. The worshippers of the letter confuse the sign or the representation with “the real thing,” the ritual accoutrements of the divine, with the mystery itself. The dead letter blocks access to the living god. Writing brought about the perversion of Judaism, the decline of original religiosity to what Hegel calls *objective religion*, that is to say, a worship of objects: fetishism.

Objective religion believes in the truth of the dead letter; the faith in the letter can be systematized in the objective rules and regulations. To this belief in external judgmental bodies Hegel opposes *subjective religion*’s emphasis on feeling and inner devotion, which cannot possibly be codified in objective terms. The religious experience has swung between the two extremes, between the dead body of writing and the honey of spirit, “objective religion can be ordered in one’s head, can be formulated in a system, and can be depicted in a book and presented to others in speech; subjective religion, on the other hand, manifests itself only in feeling and actions /.../. Subjective religion is alive, it operates within the essence itself, and is expressed in action. Subjective religion is something individual, objective religion is something abstract; the former is the *living* book of nature, the latter is the exhibition cabinet of the instructor of nature, in which insects die, seedlings wither, and animals are stuffed or preserved in spirits.”⁶ These religious polarities are woven together in the believer, they pervade each other – sometimes the one extreme has the upper hand, sometimes the other. Hegel’s speculative reading of the development of religions is structured by this dualism between subjective and objective, between the inner devotion and the fetishism of the text.

While in the textual religion of Judaism, according to Hegel, an initial religiosity is perverted, in Christianity it is a matter of a new emphasis on the individual. Christianity is trying to effect a synthesis between subjective and objective, between the individuality of the soul and the universality that characterizes faith in the letter: the Christian takes in the word of God in a

⁶ Hegels *theologische Jugendschriften*, ed. Nohl, Tübingen 1907, p. 6f.

new way. He incorporates the text and makes it his own – the law is no longer something external and abstract, but is rather the living word of God, written into the heart of the believer. The aim is to incorporate the fetish, to transform the dead writing into inner life. This takes place in love.⁷

At the heart of the Christian idea of community in which Hegel is interested is the unifying rituals of the church and the congregation. In the early text *Der Geist des Christentums*, there is a long and speculative interpretation of the Communion as the fundamental act of Christianity: the shared eating of the body of Jesus and the drinking of his blood. The mature Hegel also returns again and again to the doctrine of the incarnation, the martyrdom of Jesus, and the salvation of the faithful via the sacraments as a dialectical truth that anticipates the conceptual movements of speculative idealism on a symbolic level. The father is incarnated in the form of the son, who is sacrificed for the salvation of mankind – spirit becomes flesh that is consumed and returns to spirituality, in accordance with a dialectical law that is active on many levels. Everywhere there is a speculative circularity, an externalization

⁷ In love, one incorporates the object, and allows oneself to be incorporated: “only in love is one unified with the object, it does not rule and is not mastered.” In Christian love, a mystical union takes place, a union in the spirit of faith: “This union can be called the union between subject and object, between freedom and nature, between the actual and possible –” (*Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*, p. 376.). In love, people can be unified in a higher moral entity. It is here, according to the young Hegel, that the utopian potential of Christianity lies: through the gospel of love, the abyss between man and transcendent law, between the finite soul and the infinity of God, is bridged. In Hegel’s speculative reading, Christ then becomes a religious and political leader, whose teaching he sees as highly relevant to his own time. In *Pleroma – zu Genesis und Struktur einer dialektischen Hermeneutik bei Hegel* (in G.W.F. Hegel *Der Geist des Christentums. Schriften 1796–1800*, Frankfurt am Main / Berlin / Vienna, 1978) Werner Hamacher has demonstrated the great extent to which the young Hegel was inspired by the Christian notion of the community, how Hegel even could identify with Christ as the founder of a religion. Hegel himself dreamed of a new religious communion that would fuse reason and love. His speculative idealism would, in the spirit of love, sublimate the formal understanding of morality seen in Kantian philosophy, which leaves each subject alone with an abstract law of custom, and would instead anchor morality in a political and religious community. The young Hegel sees himself as a modern Christ who overcomes the transcendent law of Judaism (and of Kantian moral philosophy): “By reading him and restoring his religion, Hegel identifies himself with Christ, the founder of the religion of love. And just as Christ directs his teachings against empty formalism and faith in the fetish, against the letters of Jewish laws, and instead seeks to fill them with spirit, Hegel objects to the kind of Judaism that Christianity has solidified into, and against the puritanical laws of custom of his critics. Kant is a Jew. Hegel, Christ.” Hamacher, *Pleroma*, p. 59.

and returning. Hegel sees, in the ritual of the Communion, a dialectical movement between subjective and objective: the Host is an objectification of Christ's infinite love for man, but "this love that has been made objective, the subjective that has become a thing, returns to its nature, becomes once again subjective via the act of eating."⁸ Via the religious process of incorporation, the speculative circle is closed. Subject and object are reconciled in the dialectic's complicated apparatus of digestion.

Hegel spends some time in *Der Geist des Christentums* focusing on the role of eating in the creation of a religious community. He opens the discussion with a comparison: "When an Arab drinks a cup of coffee with a stranger, he enters into a bond of friendship with him. This shared act has linked them, and through this connection, the Arab has committed himself to being faithful and helping that person. Here, eating and drinking together is not what we would call a sign; the connection between the sign and the signified is not spiritual, not living, but is rather an objective bond. Sign and signified are foreign to each other, and their connection is outside them in yet a third element, in something thought. Eating and drinking with someone is a unifying act and a union that is actually experienced, not a conventional sign; it is contrary to the natural human feeling that drinking a glass of wine together with someone who is an enemy, the sense of togetherness or community in that act, would conflict to too great a degree with the general atmosphere of the encounter."⁹ Eating together is a *concrete* connection, not a conventional sign. It is a matter of taking part of the same substances in a purely physical way.¹⁰

⁸ Hegels theologische Jugendschriften, p. 299.

⁹ Ibid. p. 297.

¹⁰ In *Totem und Tabu*, in which Freud discusses the archaic ritual sacrifices that constitute the historical background of the Christian Holy Communion, there are similar observations and, oddly enough, the same examples that we see in Hegel: "The ethical power of the public sacrificial meals was based on ancient notions about the significance of eating and drinking together. /.../ Customs that are still current among Arabs that live in the desert prove that what is binding in the collective meal is not something religious, but rather the actual eating as an act. Anyone who has shared even the tiniest bite with a Bedouin, or taken a gulp of his milk, need no longer fear him as an enemy, but can be assured of his help and protection – yet not forever, but strictly speaking only as long as the substance they collectively enjoyed can be assumed to be still in the body." Freud, *Studienausgabe*, vol. IX, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 419.

The sharing of food means a participation in the same supra-individual bodiliness. The force of the connection lasts only as long as the shared substances actually remain in the individual bodies, as long as the finite subjects participate in one and the same supra-individual metabolism. Eating can never be a symbolic process of establishing something that happens once and for all, but must be constantly repeated as a concrete act in order to maintain its binding force. When the Arab's coffee has passed through the body it gradually loses its ability to create community. The ceremony must be repeated.

By means of the sacrificial meal, religious community was established via a joint partaking of a divine body. As Freud puts it: "If someone shared a meal with a god, it expressed the conviction that he was of the same material as him ..."¹¹ The Christian communion is a sublimated form of the sacrificial meal, with roots in archaic rituals; on this point Hegel and Freud are in agreement. But while Freud primarily looks back towards a mythological primal scene – the primal horde's cannibalistic sacrifice of the father – and the corresponding structurings of desire in the human psyche, Hegel sees the mystery of the Eucharist rather as an anticipation: the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the spirit and its circular return via assimilation expresses a dialectical truth which can be expressed in conceptual form only in speculative philosophy. Religion does not yet have access to the concept, but nevertheless is capable of expressing speculative truths in a symbolic medium.

The gospel of love is spread through the sacraments. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." (John 6:56). The institutionalized cannibalism of the Christian ritual is a community-building act that holds the congregation together, but according to dogma it is also the way to salvation. Christ died on the cross so that the believers would be assured an eternal life, and through the regular sacrament of the Communion, this promise between God and man is confirmed continuously. By means of a concrete assimilation of an eternally innocent Son of Man, the believers are emancipated from guilt and gain access to the kingdom of heaven: the believer eats innocence. Because Christ lives forever, he can continually be eaten anew.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 420.

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” we read in the Gospel of John. The eating of the Host is an incorporation of the body of Christ. It is not, as Hegel points out, a matter of a symbolic appropriation – the sacramental wafer and the wine are not “conventional signs” – but it is rather a matter of a genuine and concrete assimilation of Jesus’s flesh and blood. The theological battles about transubstantiation and how the presence of God in the sacraments should be understood are among the more tenebrous in the history of the Church. And the great variety of legends that revolve around the mystery of the Eucharist are almost limitless.¹²

The Christian idea of incarnation contains many levels. As God the Father assumes earthly form as the Son of Man, the spirit is incarnated in the Word. The Word of God, *verbum dei*, turned to flesh at the dawn of creation: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) This doctrine of

12 For the most part, these legends are about miracles that have occurred in connection with the communion and that were able to convince even the most skeptical and irreverent of God’s presence in the sacramental wafer. An often recounted scene of this sort took place during the time of Gregory the Great: “One time, a woman who from time to time, in accordance with the [old] practice of Christians, offered up her [mass] bread to the church, smiled slightly when she heard Saint Gregory proclaiming beside the altar: ‘May the body of our Lord Jesus preserve your soul unto everlasting life.’ Immediately, Gregory withdrew his hand, with which he had intended to offer the Host to the woman, and put the holy bread back on the table. He then asked in the presence of the entire congregation what she dared laugh at. And the woman replied: ‘I smiled because you gave the name of the body of God to bread that I myself baked with my own hands.’ At that point, Gregory fell to his knees and prayed to God for this woman’s lack of faith. And when he got up he saw that the Host on the altar had been transformed into flesh, which took the form of a finger. He showed the finger to the skeptical woman, whose doubt immediately vanished. And the saint prayed yet again, and the flesh yet again took the form of bread, and Gregory communed the woman with the bread.” Yrjö Hirn, *Det heliga skrinet* [The Holy Shrine], Stockholm 1909, p. 123. Similar stories appear in many different variations, often with even more drastic details, such as the Host suddenly starting to talk, or turning into a cascade of blood. The stories are always fundamentally about demonstrating the actual presence of the divinity in the bread and wine.

It is not about symbolic rituals, but about an actual incorporation of the divine body, what in Lutheran theology is called the “Realpräzens” of the Holy Ghost in the Host. Transubstantiation is to be understood in a concrete sense – in the mouth, the bread is turned into the body of Jesus: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” For an account of medieval theological conflicts surrounding the Eucharist, see: R. Shulte, *Die Messe als Opfer der Kirche*, Münster 1959. The view of the sacrament of communion found in Lutheran theology has been studied by A. Peters in *Realpräzens. Luthers Zeugnis von Christi Gegenwart im Abendmahl*, Berlin 1960.

creation via externalization – of the incarnation of spirit in flesh and words – is perhaps the most essential contribution of Christianity to our view of language, interpretation, and understanding: “Exegesis interprets the materialization of the word as a miracle just as great as the miracle of God’s transformation into flesh.”¹³ The analogy between the father’s incarnation in the son and the presence of spirit in the word also has implications for the assimilation of the two bodies: the religious eating of the body of Jesus in the Communion has a parallel in the reading of the divine word in the Holy Scriptures. In both cases, it is about an assimilation of something *external* that must be incorporated and made into something *internal*; the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures takes on the life that lies hidden in the dead letter – in religious eating, the believer assimilates the worldly food, in order to gain access to God’s own living body through the mystery of transubstantiation. How far does this parallel go?

No one has invested more in the correspondence between food and text than Hegel. Reading is eating, an assimilation and incorporation of the external in one’s own subjectivity, whose ability to break down the foreign substance makes it look like a genuine digestive apparatus. As early as *Der Geist des Christentums* Hegel had already sketched out this analogy between assimilation carried out by the act of reading and the eating of the Host that takes place in the Communion: “But this love that is made objective [the Host], this subjective love, which has become a thing, returns to its nature, becomes once again subjective via the act of eating. This process of returning can in a certain respect be compared to the thought that has become a thing in the written word, and, after having been something dead, an object, recovers its subjectivity via the act of reading. The comparison would be even more pertinent if the written word were to disappear as a thing by being read and understood, in the same way that the enjoyment of the bread and wine make these disappear as objects.”¹⁴ Assimilation via reading has limits, it runs up against insurmountable opposition in the dead body of the letter. To read is to eat, but hermeneutics is not entirely exempt from digestive disorders. The sweet honey of writing is enjoyed and digested – but the corpse remains, impossible to digest.

¹³ Gadamer, p. 397.

¹⁴ *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*, p. 299.

Werner Hamacher's rather pertinacious study *Pleroma – zu Genesis und Struktur einer dialektischen Hermeneutik bei Hegel*, focuses entirely on this far-reaching correspondence between eating and reading, digesting and understanding.¹⁵ Figures of incorporation leave their mark on the whole of the Hegelian philosophy: everything shall be incorporated into the infinite metabolism of spirit. Hamacher shows how the use of this metaphor is formulated in Hegel's early writings in connection with the speculative interpretations of Christianity's doctrine of incarnation and the communion ritual. But even in the mature Hegel's encyclopedic system we see the use of this metaphor – what Derrida called “the tropes of cannibalism” – as the fundamental paradigm of speculative thought: spirit, conceived as absolute subject, is externalized and incarnated in an external medium, to then return in accordance with the circular motion of the dialectic, enriched by virtue of its worldly exile. Spirit negates itself – steps out of itself and becomes flesh. But speculative movement is based on the principle of double negation: the flesh is negated, consumed, and dematerialized back into spirit. As Hamacher puts it: “Spirit reads, eats itself, as nourishment become text.”¹⁶

The young Hegel's comparison between the eating of the communion and the reading of Holy Scripture is in no way original, but is thoroughly rooted in the history of Christian hermeneutics. The incorporation of the flesh is the fundamental operation of Christianity. It is, as Gadamer has shown, a result of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit's incarnation in language and in the body of Jesus.¹⁷ The Church Fathers had already developed the analogy between the Paschal Lamb of the Holy Communion and interpretation of Holy Scripture. The comparison was often carried out in great detail. In *Origines*, the system and ordering of reading is correlated in great detail with the system and ordering of eating: “When eating, one should begin with the head, that is, with the most important and fundamental teachings on the heavenly things. One should finish with the feet, since that which one

¹⁵ Hamacher's *Pleroma – zu Genesis und Struktur einer dialektischen Hermeneutik bei Hegel* is the most detailed study of the figure of incorporation in Hegel. An important predecessor is Jacques Derrida's *Glas*, Paris 1974.

¹⁶ Hamacher, p. 133.

¹⁷ Gadamer, p. 397.

should want to get to know last should be those things in nature that are at the lowest level, the entire realm of the material, the infernal, the evil spirits and impure demons; for the teachings about these things that are contained in the mystery of Scripture can in a figurative sense be called the 'feet' of the lamb. The 'entrails' of the lamb, that which in Scripture is internal and hidden, cannot be cast aside; one must rather approach Scripture as a coherent body. And the extremely solid context that exists in the harmony of the composition should not be ground down into fine parts, or hacked into bits."¹⁸ The body parts of the sacrificial lamb are devoured in turn, like the doctrines of Scripture that the believer assimilates in accordance with the rules of hermeneutics. The Church Father incorporates and assimilates the letters like the Paschal Lamb of the communion.

In the poet Novalis, a contemporary of Hegel, the relation of the mystery of the communion to intellectual assimilation is expressed in several pointed fragments:

All enjoyment, all taking in and assimilation, is eating, or rather: eating is nothing other than assimilation. All spiritual pleasure can be expressed through eating. In friendship, one really eats of the friend, or feeds on him. It is a genuine trope to substitute the body for the spirit – and, at a commemorative dinner for a friend, to enjoy, with bold, supersensual imagination, his flesh in every bite, and his blood in every gulp. This certainly seems barbaric to the pithless taste of our time – but who forces us to think of precisely the raw, rotting flesh and blood? The physical assimilation is mysterious enough to be a beautiful image of the spiritual *meaning* – and are blood and flesh really so loathsome and ignoble? In truth, there is more here than gold and diamonds, and the time is soon at hand when we will have a higher conception of the organic body. Who knows how sublime a symbol blood is? It is precisely that which is disgusting in the organic components that points to something very lofty in them. We recoil from them, as if from ghosts, and sense with childish terror a mysterious world in this mix, perhaps an old acquaintance.

¹⁸ Origines, cited in H.J. Spitz, *Die Metaphorik des geistigen Schriftsinns*, Munich 1972, p. 20.

But to return to the commemorative dinner – can't it be imagined that our friend has turned into a being whose body has now become bread, and whose blood has become wine?¹⁹

It is unusual for this imagery to be highlighted in this way. But the trope of cannibalism nonetheless pervades the philosophical tradition's perspective on intellectual assimilation. Hamacher points to a tension between Hegel's sensitivity towards the limits of eating (reading) and his insistence on complete interpretability – the limitless, total eating of absolute spirit. On the one hand, he is aware of the limitations of the analogy: "The comparison would be even more accurate if the written word really were to disappear as a thing by being read and understood."²⁰ Eating really does destroy its object – it incorporates it and breaks it down in the digestive apparatus – while reading, to be sure, involves assimilating the meanings of the text, but is not capable of disintegrating the corporeal side of the letter. Hegel seems to be aware of this limitation of hermeneutic eating. Yet on the other hand, he makes use of the tropes of speculative cannibalism as if their application were limitless: spirit comes out of itself, materializes into flesh, eats itself and returns to its spiritual origin, without leaving any leftovers behind. The Christian doctrine of incarnation, the sacrificial meal and salvation are elevated to the universal truth of world spirit: history is an auto-cannibalistic drama of salvation. Philosophy is a speculative Good Friday.²¹

Hamacher traces the tropology of cannibalism – the idea of reading and understanding as a kind of eating – from the interpretations in Hegel's early writings on Christianity's ritual of the communion up to the developed system in *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* and *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, where explicit references to the mystery of the Eucharist had become quite infrequent, but where eating itself had become all the more ruthless. In the discussion of the mysterious eating of the gospel of love found

¹⁹ Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe* (vol. 2), Munich 1972, p. 409f.

²⁰ See note 14.

²¹ Hamacher, p. 209. The notion of the "speculative Good Friday" also appears in J-L Nancy's discussion with Derrida, "Il faut bien manger' ou le calcul du sujet," in *Après le sujet qui vient*, Confrontation 20, Paris 1989.

in his early writings, there was an acceptance of the limits of assimilation – in the mature system there are no such restrictions: the eating is absolute. In the *Phenomenology's* closing chapter on “absolute knowledge,” the externalization of spirit and the successive process of its returning through history is described as an arduous digestive process: the subject of history “must go through and digest [verdauen] this whole of its rich substance.”²² The central concept of *Aufhebung* – which means a suspending or canceling which at the same time is a preserving – can be taken to be a devouring. One epoch is swallowed up by the next, in which it is broken down, but nevertheless preserved as a moment in a more comprehensive metabolism. Spirit consumes itself through history, successfully incorporating all substance, finally to reach the total saturation of absolute knowing (absolute eating) – a state Hegel can, with a Neoplatonic term, refer to as *Pleroma* (fullness, saturation).²³

But what happened to the young Hegel's understanding of the limits of reading (eating)? Hamacher reads, to borrow an expression from Derrida, the *letter* of Hegelian philosophy against its *spirit*. The absolute system demands that nothing shall be inaccessible to the appropriative movement of the concept – spirit permits no leftovers, nothing that is left outside or expelled from the abdomen of philosophy, which is always equally hungry. But at the level of the *letter* – the concrete analyses of the sacrifice, of eating, reading, the process of theoretically assimilating – we see that the equation will never entirely come to an end. The total assimilation, which transforms everything that is alien and external into internal life, is a philosophical dream. At the level of the letter, there are always slag byproducts. No reading exists which assimilates and dissolves the “inedible remains of the letter,” no eating exists that does not leave leftovers behind, there is no theoretical process of assimilation that transforms the object into a moment in the structure of the subject. As Hamacher puts it: “Something remains, a deficit or a surplus, which is not incorporated in the body of ontology.”²⁴

22 Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 590.

23 For a discussion on the concept *pleroma* in Hegel and in Neoplatonism, see Hamacher, p. 106ff.

24 Ibid. p. 163.

To sacrifice is to eat, to eat is to sacrifice²⁵ – Hegel demands the absolute sacrifice: a swallowing, a devouring, that leaves no traces of the sacrificial animal. No bones, no skin, no entrails can remain. The fetishes of the text, of the sacrificial animal, or of the communion must be incorporated into the life of spirit. The speculative communion of Christianity cancels Judaism's fetishism of the text – the dead letters are broken down into spirit. The holy bread carries the incarnated deity within itself, the Host is the absolute fetish in edible form. Hegel is aware of the Scholastic consequences of this doctrine, and is not afraid to make the examples even more incisive: "In the medieval church, the Host was worshipped as an external thing in such a way that if a mouse eats the Host, one must worship the mouse and its excrement."²⁶ Spirit becomes flesh, is ingested, and is transformed into feces. Here is the limit of the edible, the terminus for theological hermeneutics. As Hamacher puts it: "God becomes material in the Host, and becomes a metabolized, indigestible piece of excrement; the universe of spirit has become mouse shit; eschatology has been turned into scatology."²⁷ Isn't this an example of the limits of the process of incorporation? A piece of mouse shit makes hermeneutics collapse.

In the *Phenomenology*, one finds a vision of a cosmos that is constantly consuming itself, a world where things are not what they first appear to be, but, under the surface of sensual perception, are shown to be involved in an all-encompassing eating. Those who believe in the stability of sensual things are caught in the fetishism of the traditional theory of knowledge, a naive view of what things are that even animals have the power to refute: "Not even animals are excluded from this wisdom; in fact they are shown to be those that are most deeply initiated into the truth of this wisdom, for they do not remain standing in front of sensual things as things existing in themselves, but, in despair over this reality, and assured of its emptiness, they seize

²⁵ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Theorie-Werkausgabe*, vol. 14, p. 37.

²⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, cited in Hamacher, p. 216. This scholastic consequence of the doctrine of transubstantiation led to a conflict between Hegel and the Catholic church. See R. Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit*, Berlin 1857, p. 509 ff.

²⁷ Hamacher, p. 216.

the opportunity and consume them.”²⁸ The animal does not incorporate the thing in an abstract sense, like the Church Father who, in reading, “eats” the Holy Scripture’s doctrines. The animal is a concrete hermeneuticist.

To read is to eat, but both of these activities leave behind traces. As Hamacher shows, reading is unable to dissolve the mute body of the letter; the text remains, indigestible. The dream of a reading without remainder is – however much Hegel tries to convince himself otherwise – a futile dream. In a different context, he speaks of the grief born of the recognition of the impossibility of definitively merging the dead body with the forces of life.²⁹ The same *Trauer* is inherent in all reading, for it is fundamentally about the same impossibility. The “I” that reads will never be able to fuse with that which is read, an inaccessible remainder that prevents complete reconciliation will always be left over. The reflection on this impossibility is a work of mourning: “All reading begets grief, since it is forced to experience the irreconcilability between the corpse of the text, in which the thought has solidified into an external form, and the subjective life of the understanding. Reading is a work of mourning, a mourning over that loss of unity between objectification and subjectivity, a loss produced by the act of reading itself. Reading is thus potentially infinite – an infinite melancholy – because it is reading itself that creates the gap that it is trying to overcome.”³⁰ Hunger for the inedible remainder can, for Hamacher, never be alleviated, all reading is therefore melancholic. The interpreting reader becomes an inconsolable yet indefatigable hunger artist. He eats unceasingly, but thereby simply exacerbates his hunger for the inedible.

Just as little as reading could ever assimilate the dead body of the letter can eating once and for all incorporate, without any remains, the food. Even the cult-like eating of the ritual sacrifice respects the limits of incorporation – certain organs and body parts are left behind. The gall bladder is that which is absolutely inedible. It is always left, as we saw above, untouched.³¹

28 *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 91.

29 Hamacher, p. 123.

30 Ibid.

31 See chap. VIII, “The Sacrifice,” p. 111.

Hegel disregards this fact. He dreams of a total economy, an incorporation of everything external in the great metabolism of the system. The subject of history to “go through and digest this whole of its rich substance” until, finally, everything is incorporated into a body that feels a complete and utter saturation. The system eats (or wants to eat) everything: “Everything must become food-stuffs” (Novalis).³² No leftovers or excrement can be accepted at the sacrificial feast of absolute spirit. Even the remainder must be sacrificed – for the sake of the whole.

Isn't there a danger that the subject will overeat, that the feeling of being sated will then turn into feelings of nausea and disgust? Hegel admits this possibility, and notes that the main cause of disruptions in digestion is an excess of bile. Bile – that historically burdened bodily fluid – plays a key role in the body's assimilation process. It is bile that breaks down the foreign substance entering the system, and is the very thing that makes possible the assimilation of it. But bile also establishes limits that apply to all assimilation: its caustic juice itself cannot be broken down. In this way, it constitutes an ambiguous frontier zone between the organism and the foreign substance that is to be incorporated. All incorporation occurs through the mouth, but it is only by means of the corrosive powers of bile that real assimilation becomes possible.³³

Satiety in the organism could result in the overproduction of bile. A crisis situation arises: the organism turns against itself – bile goes on the attack not against that which is foreign, but against that which is its own, resulting in belching. The bodily economy has been disrupted; the organism is no longer a harmonious whole, but is in a state of internal conflict: “When the organism in this way separates itself from itself, it becomes filled with disgust and no longer has any confidence in itself. This is what takes place in the internal struggle, when the organism expels the bile that it has sent out.”³⁴ Bile, which in this way turns the organism inside out, is repelled – vomited out. It can no longer be tolerated as a moment in the life of the body, but must be transformed into something external.

³² Novalis, *Fragment*, Lund 1991, p. 67. *Werke. Tagebücher und Briefe*, (vol. 2), Munich 1978, p. 350.

³³ Hamacher, p. 272.

³⁴ Hegel, *Enz.* § 365, *Zusatz*, cited in Hamacher, p. 280.

When the organism's balanced feeling of satisfaction is disrupted via vomiting, the simple difference between internal and external is sublated. Hegel has described a similar process in the excretion of animals: "The abstract expulsion of itself by which the animal makes itself into something external is excretion, the termination of the assimilation process. By thus making itself into something external, that which was made external becomes something inorganic, an abstract *other*, in which the animal does not possess its own identity."³⁵ The animal expels itself in the excrement, and thereby loses its simple and unproblematic identity. The scientific study of excrement – scatology – thus becomes a science of the limits of the organism's self-identity.

On the one hand, bile breaks down the substances that shall be digested, it "plays the main role"³⁶ in the assimilation process; on the other hand, it shows the limitations of assimilation: it is itself indigestible. Is it a coincidence that it is precisely bile which acquires this borderline position? According to Hamacher, the realization of the limits of reading (eating) – awareness of the impossibility of a final reconciliation – produces grief and melancholy. The authentic self-consciousness of the system consists in an awareness of its own limitations – the realization of the inability of the absolute system to coincide with itself. The system's hunger for the assimilation of everything external is endless, and, despite Hegel's constant assurances, will never be able to be stilled.

But Hegel himself is not a melancholiac. He is simultaneously aware and unaware of the limits of eating – he manages to repress his melancholy-eliciting insights. On the one hand, he, on a level that Adorno would call "micrological," analyzes the border phenomenon of eating and assimilation: the leftovers of the sacrificial meal, disgust, excretion, vomiting. On the other hand, he makes claims, on the system's "macrological" level, for the possibility of an appropriation without a remainder: the system has no exterior, all that is expelled shall be reclaimed. From the point of view of the speculative dialectic, there is no loss that does not ultimately mean a gain. Dialectical cannibalism leaves nothing untouched – what is expelled at one level shall be

³⁵ Ibid. p. 281.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 272.

incorporated on the next. That is what Hegel maintains, but at the same time he has at his disposal the critical tools that can undermine the totalizing position: the necessity of excretion. At all levels, there are slag byproducts and remains – an expelled part which cannot be appropriated. As usual, the problem is formulated in a more pointed and drastic way in Novalis: “Would anyone be able to survive by eating his own excrement –.”³⁷ That would be the Hegelian economy driven to its ultimate consequence.

The knowledge of limits of eating and the impossibility of a final reconciliation generates grief and melancholy only if thought is dominated by a longing for the whole and totality. It is only in relation to an absolute subject in Hegel’s sense that man’s finite and isolated subjectivity is an “unhappy consciousness.” Only against the background of the dream of a total eating and a total satedness (*pleroma*) is hunger for the inassimilable melancholic. It is possible to imagine a completely different way of approaching this limit: a reflection on the inedible that neither does violence to the limit by trying – as Hegel does – to exceed it, nor loses itself in deep melancholy in the face of the impossibility of a final reconciliation: a kind of thinking that doesn’t let itself be controlled by the notion of a closed economy, but is able to grasp eating, surplus, and sacrifice freed from the dream of an all-encompassing system. Such an antieconomy is outlined in Nietzsche, and is developed further in a series of modern texts, perhaps most forcibly in Georges Bataille.³⁸

Bataille read Nietzsche early on, and the identification was total. At last, he had found a thinker who understood the significance of lightness and

³⁷ Novalis, cited in Hamacher, p. 303.

³⁸ Nietzsche’s antisystematic philosophy seeks to free itself from the oppressive idea of the whole: beyond – or outside – the stingy economy founded on the principle of assimilation, the Nietzschean aphorism is articulated as an intensity without relation to the putatively all-encompassing circle of the system. Hegelian thought is governed by incorporation and memory: the duality in the German *Erinnerung* (memory and “making something internal / bringing something into the most inner part”) demonstrates, according to Hegel, a speculative truth (*Phänomenologie des Geist*, p. 591): in the absolute memory of spirit all exteriority is collected and incorporated – history’s slow work of memory is a return from a worldly exile. Against this belief in a memory that is able to incorporate everything into the system’s closed circle, Nietzsche emphasizes the lightness of forgetting. By “active forgetting” the thought gains access to a different space, not to the deep interiority that is opened up via Hegel’s *Erinnerung*, but to an absolute *external*, a completely blank exteriority. Like a dancing star, the *Übermensch* takes a step out of the slow cycle of history – out into a friction-free zone without memory and heaviness.

laughter. The affirmative power of laughter is deeper than all serious thought and all philosophical systems: laughter transcends, sublates, demolishes – in its ecstatic vortex, the system is shattered. For Bataille, Nietzschean laughter is the transgressive movement that breaks up the economy of closed thinking – what Foucault called an “antieconomical transgression.”³⁹ Laughter is excess, sacrifice, wastefulness In laughter we have the liberation of forgetting: stepping out of history with a dance, into the labyrinthine lightness of the moment.

Bataille fully embraces the Nietzschean ambition of coming to terms with the totalizing will of the Hegelian philosophy. Few anti-Hegelians have, with the same energy, worked their way through all the nooks and recesses of the Hegelian system in order to turn the systematizer’s insights against him at every point. Bataille turns the Hegelian system inside out, not only at a conceptual level, but also on a metaphoric level. He highlights the central tropes in Hegel’s thought in order then to invert and pervert the fundamental idealist thrust. To Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, which is capable of lifting the phenomena to increasingly idealized levels, Bataille contrasts the base, dirty, and formless: scatology. To Hegel’s metaphysics of light, with its use of solar metaphors, he contrasts the malevolent influence of a rotting and black sun. To the figures of incorporation, he contrasts the most base form of expulsion: excretion.⁴⁰

Bataille’s almost monomaniacal and at times quite tiresome invocations of the base and perverted must be seen as the expression of a lifelong rebellion against idealism, Platonic as well as Hegelian. Sometimes it amounts to a kind of cataloging of “anti-idealistic” phenomena, where the Hegelian rhetoric is sharpened and transposed, as in the following excess, entitled “Appropriation and Excretion”:

Sexual activity, be it perverse or otherwise; the behavior of one sex before the other; defecation and urination, death and the cult of cadavers (above all, insofar as it involves the stinking decomposition of bodies); the dif-

³⁹ Michel Foucault, “Préface à la transgression,” *Critique* nr. 195–196, 1963.

⁴⁰ See Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, transl. Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis 1985.

ferent taboos; ritual cannibalism, the sacrifice of animal-gods; omophagia; the laughter of exclusion; sobbing (which in general has death as its object); religious ecstasy; the identical attitude towards excrement, gods, and cadavers; the terror that so often accompanies involuntary excretion; the custom of exchanging brilliant, lubricious, painted and jeweled women; gambling; heedless expenditure and certain fanciful uses of money, etc., together present a common characteristic in that the object of the activity (excrement, shameful parts, cadavers, etc.) is in every case treated as a foreign body (*das ganz Anderes*); in other words, it can just as well be expelled following a brutal rupture as reabsorbed through the desire to put one's body and mind entirely in a more or less violent state of expulsion (or projection). The notion of the (heterogeneous) *foreign body* permits one to note the fundamental *subjective* identity between types of excretions (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, feces) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous: a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud can be seen as characteristic of this unity.⁴¹

In Bataille we have a theory about the *heterogeneous*, about that which cannot be fit into the individual body, nor into the social body, but must be expelled. Bataille calls his science *heterology*; it studies the basic mechanisms of expulsion that he finds at work in the establishment of social and psychological organisms: that which is alien must be rejected or sacrificed – and thereby declared to be dirty or holy – in order that it shall be able to maintain its *own* unambiguous identity. Difference and expulsion precede unity and appropriation. That which *belongs to oneself* does not, as Hegel thinks, come about by incorporating everything external, but by a violent exclusion of the *other*.

More than anyone before him, Bataille focuses his attention on the figures of incorporation in Hegelian philosophy – spirit's dialectical process of appropriation, understood as a comprehensive eating. Bataille's scatology and his monomaniacal interest in sacrificial rites is rooted in a desire to lib-

41 Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes II*, p. 60.

erate himself from the idea of the economy of dialectical thought, which he believes rests on an erroneous emphasis on lack as the driving force behind the system's endless hunger and desire to appropriate external substance. The eating in ritual sacrifices can be understood in a radically anti-economic way; not on the basis of the desire for gain, but rather as pure excess and wastefulness – an unreserved combustion of inassimilable surplus energy.⁴²

The ostentatious destruction of wealth exists as a basic cultural mechanism in modern societies as well, albeit at a more sublimated level. The fundamental idea is a necessary using up of the surplus energy: a ritual consuming, annihilating, eating, which can have the most diverse expressions. Bataille sees the same basic principle of loss in the investment of colossal sums of money in jewelry and gemstones, in the production of sacred objects and in the creation of poetry and art – in all cases what is at work is a wastefulness that cannot be explained on the basis of the economic principle of gain. The basic phenomenon at work here is *luxury*, or *extravagance*.⁴³

⁴² In his major “economic” treatise *La part maudite* [The Accursed Share] from 1949, Bataille begins from a fundamental fact about the cosmos: the sun spreads its energy without demanding any quid pro quo. The rays of the self-combusting celestial body reach the earth and are transformed into the vital force in plants and animals. A growing surplus of energy accumulates in the earthly life forms. This surplus governs all development on the globe – it must constantly be consumed, combusted, sacrificed. It constitutes “the accursed share.” This theory of “the distribution of energy over the surface of the earth” comes to terms with usefulness and gain as the highest principles. Classical economics has misunderstood the fundamental condition of life on earth and has taken lack and work to be the engine of development. Bataille turns this perspective on its head: the driving force is the superabundance – the surplus that must be sacrificed. It is only the need to constantly burn the superabundance of energy that can explain the growth of life, society, and the trend of culture towards increasingly complex and energy-intensive forms.

Bataille is interested in customs and practices that give this shape to this principle of loss. He sees a clear example in the ritual sacrifices of North American Indians known as “potlatch.” This is a kind of rite of excess at which people let significant parts of their harvest go up in smoke. Bataille finds similar forms of ritual wastefulness in various parts of the world: “The Chukchi in north-eastern Siberia, who have institutions that are similar to the potlatch, execute highly valuable teams of sled dogs to provoke and humiliate another group. In northwestern parts of North America the destruction goes so far as to involve burning down villages and flotillas of canoes. Inlaid copper ingots, a kind of coin which sometimes was given a fictitious value so that they would amount to immense riches, were destroyed and thrown into the sea.” *La part maudite*, Paris 1949, p. 16.

In the Mexican sacrificial meal, Bataille sees a rite that mimics the sun's absolute generosity, specifically, there is in these cultish practices a giving without taking, like the sun spreading its warmth and its light – an extravagance with no thought of gain. Eating of the flesh of the sacrificed human being is not an incorporation, but a pure sacrifice to the sun-god. Religious eating here is not a unifying sacrament – like the Christian Holy Communion – but a way to participate in the excessive generosity that is deeper than any unity and any reconciliatory whole. The bloody human sacrifice breaks up the economy's closed system; it is an “extreme moment in the cycle of dissipation,” which expresses the principle of universal wastefulness.⁴³

This kind of “communion” is something Bataille can set against the dialectical circle of the Christian drama of salvation: sacrifice not as a return, but as absolute expenditure and loss. The ritual sacrifice – this “scandal of death and consumed flesh” – is not about salvation from death and return to the eternal life of God, but of an affirmation of death as the most extreme expression of life's inherent principle of loss. Death is the highest form of extravagance: “The very fragility of the animal carcass, its complexity, is an expression of that luxury, but that fragility, that luxury, culminates in death.”⁴⁴ Of all living creatures it is man who – like the sun itself – is most suited to consuming the surplus of energy that accumulates in forms of life. The moment of death in humans is the point of ecstasy that is able to express the antieconomical truth of life in a maximally concentrated way. The luxury involved in

43 According to Bataille, of all forms of luxury it is the carnivorous species' consumption of one another that is the highest form: “Here, the wild beast constitutes the highpoint: its constant plundering of plunderers represents an enormous squandering of energy. William Blake asked of the tiger: In what distant deeps or skies / Burnt the fire of thine eyes? What struck him was the fierce atmosphere, at the border of the possible, life's intense ability to consume. In the general heat of life, the tiger is an extremely hot point. And that heat has just flared up in the distant depths of heaven, in the sun's act of incineration.” *La part maudite*, p. 62. The killing and ingesting of the animal is an expression of the wastefulness demanded by the energetic satiety: when the system is unable to bind more energy, the surplus must be sacrificed. Bataille sees this cosmic principle of combustion manifested in religious ritual sacrifices in the most distant and varied cultural contexts. In *La part maudite* he focuses in particular on human sacrifices and archaic sun rituals in ancient Mexico – “the highpoints of terror in the cruel chain of religious rites.” *Ibid.* p. 79.

44 *Ibid.* p. 93.

45 *Ibid.* p. 62.

death must be understood “first as a negation of us, ourselves, then, in a sudden inversion, as the profound truth of the movement that life expresses.”⁴⁶

“Hegel did not know how right he was,” observes Bataille.⁴⁷ In his speculations on the relation of death to life, Bataille is simultaneously very close and infinitely far away from the Hegelian position – just as was the case with his ideas on sacrifice and eating. In Hegel’s speculative dialectic as well, death is understood not as a simple, external negation of life, but as a moment in the infinite life of spirit. The externality of death is described in the preface to *Phänomenologie des Geistes* as the domain of negativity and labor – something external that spirit passes through, in order then, enriched by the speculative “work of mourning,” to return to itself: all according to the Hegelian figure of inversion that makes it possible for spirit to find itself in its *other* – life finds itself in its negation, in death, which it therewith manages to sublate and incorporate via an *Aufhebung*. The all-encompassing life of spirit emerges from the dialectic between *Bios* and *Thanatos* as the clear winner: “However, the life that shrinks back from death and maintains itself in a state of purity, avoiding ruin, is not the life of spirit; rather, the life of spirit is that life which bears death calmly, and sustains itself therein. Spirit only arrives at its truth when it finds itself in absolute tornness / disruption [*Zerrissenheit*].”⁴⁸ To think death and the external – the lifeless mechanism, the pure loss – outside this circularity would, for Hegelian reason, be tantamount to madness.⁴⁹

46 Ibid.

47 Bataille, cited as an epigraph to Derrida’s “De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale” in *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris 1967.

48 Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 36.

49 Bataille affirms this madness. Death cannot be made to fit into the reconciliatory economy of the larger context of life, but forces its way out as a pure excess: death is an “antieconomical scandal.” The ritual sacrifices in which Bataille is interested give form to this scandalous wastefulness. In Bataille, as well, death is “the profound truth about the movement expressed by life” – but that truth is not, as in Hegel, the closed system of the speculative economy, but rather life’s generosity, understood as a highest form of luxury. Bataille denies the dialectical appropriation as a highest principle; here, sacrifice and eating are grasped not from the standpoint of Hegelian reconciliation, but on the basis of principles of surplus and transgression.



For Bataille, the truth of the speculative communion is no longer reconciliation and return, but rather pure sacrifice for sacrifice's sake. The eating of flesh is no hermeneutic appropriation, it is an act without any thought of gain. What's important about Bataille for us is that he calls into question the analogy proffered by hermeneutics between religious eating and the assimilation that takes place in the act of reading. If the act of appropriating is, in point of fact, always secondary in relation to a deeper principle of loss, what then are the implications for the idea of hermeneutic incorporation? Is there a non-hermeneutic kind of reading that rests not on appropriation, but on expenditure and wastefulness? A kind of reading that does not incorporate the text into spirit's living organism, but respects the movements of the dead letter in something external, that is inedible?

Jacques Derrida's deconstructive philosophy stands opposed to the belief in complete readability: all interpretations leave a remainder of something uninterpreted and, in principle, uninterpretable. Against hermeneutic assimilation and its dream of a total *Horizontverschmelzung* – where that which is read and the one reading merge into a shared medium – the deconstructionist proposes that which is radically inaccessible in every text. The fundamental idea is Heideggerian: all philosophical systems have an obverse – *das Ungedachte* (the “unthought”) – that cannot be thought under this scheme, but must remain *unthought*.⁵⁰ The great speculative philosophies try to incorporate everything, but necessarily have a blind spot that cannot be thematized. Philosophy's dream of a total appropriation does violence to this necessary remainder.⁵¹

A register of oral and digestive terms leaves its mark on hermeneutic theory: assimilation, incorporation, *Verschmelzung*. There is no doubt that the modern theory of interpretation, like the Hegelian dialectic, has deep roots in Christian hermeneutics. But the modern theory of interpretation does not push the analogy between food intake and reading as far as the Church Fathers do, who take the eating of the Paschal Lamb to be a direct

50 For a clear presentation of Heidegger's view of *das Ungedachte*, that which necessarily must remain invisible in every metaphysical system, see Heidegger's “Zeit und Sein” [Time and Being] in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, Tübingen 1976.

counterpart to the interpretation of the holy doctrines. But nevertheless, hermeneutics is still governed by figures of incorporation; Western metaphysics of presence and phonocentrism come into contact here with the symbolism of ritual sacrifice and religious eating, even if at times in an extremely sublimated form. By incorporating and appropriating the flesh of the text, the interpretive subject assures itself of the presence of meaning.

Derrida's problematizing of traditional hierarchies and his emphasis on the irreducible nature of writing has also resulted in a confrontation with the hermeneutical idea of assimilation and appropriation. As early as his 1967 essay on Bataille's notion of the economic, Derrida argued for an anti-economy that would break the closed circle of Hegel's systematizing philosophy.⁵² Connections could be made between the transgressive motion of the sacrificial victim and the new understanding of writing: writing resists all

51 Derrida's readings of key texts in the metaphysical tradition have revolved around a series of crucial dichotomies: voice/writing, presence/absence, unity/difference, life/death. The Western tradition from Plato to Husserl has emphasized voice and presence at the expense of writing. In the living voice, the subject is immediately present before itself; the voice is the medium of truth, while the dead signs of the text constitute a dangerous exile in which the original truth can easily be lost. In the voice, the truth is immediately accessible – writing, on the other hand, introduces a threatening difference that displaces and delays the moment of truth in the play of signs and representations. Derrida has pointed out the ambivalent relationship of the philosophy of the “metaphysics of presence” to the condemned writing. On the one hand, the sign is excluded as secondary in relation to the living voice, but on the other hand, writing is stressed as something necessary to the constitution of objective and communicable truth. This tension can be found in a very similar form in Plato and Hegel, in Rousseau and Husserl; writing and death repeatedly obtrude and death cannot simply be shut out from truth and life.

Even in a modern hermeneuticist like Hans-Georg Gadamer – whose philosophical theory of interpretation is based entirely on the exchangeability of the text and the written word – there is, as we saw above, the traditional devaluation of writing as a dead external medium: “All writing is, as we have said, a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning. Because, in writing, the meaning is subjected to a sort of self-alienation, this process of transforming it back is the actual hermeneutic task.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 371. Writing implies an “alienation,” an absence that threatens the absolute presence of the life of consciousness before itself. It must therefore be incorporated and given life by means of the hermeneutic assimilation that sublates everything external by extracting the “spiritual honey” of the dead signs. In this way, Gadamer carries on the fundamental values that have left their mark on the Platonic tradition: the dominance of voice, life and presence. Writing must be incorporated and recuperated back into meaning. As we suggested above, this assimilation is oral; in hermeneutics, phonocentrism comes into contact with the topology of cannibalism.

52 “De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale” in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris 1967.

totalizing will, all attempts to recover meaning via hermeneutic appropriation. Following Bataille, Derrida understands the limits of reading as the *limits of eating*: not everything can be incorporated, the dead body of the letter remains as something absolutely external. What Hegel condemned as a fetishism of the text is affirmed as the freedom of writing in a radical exteriority.

What Derrida in recent years has sought to do is to take Werner Hamacher's analysis of the Hegelian system and generalize it to a reading of the culturally widespread figures of eating. In an interview from 1989, he emphasizes the deep structure of sacrifice that lies at the heart of the Western tradition: "I feel called upon to stress the *structure of sacrifice* present in the discourse to which I refer. I do not know whether 'structure of sacrifice' is the most appropriate expression. In any event, it is about revealing the open place in the structure of these discourses (which are also 'cultures') that admit of a legal killing. Such is the ingestion, incorporation, or introjection of the dead body – an operation that is at once symbolic and real, where the body is 'bestial' (and who can seriously believe that our cultures are meat-eating because animal proteins are irreplaceable?), a symbolic operation where the body is 'human.'"⁵³ In a series of incisive formulations, Derrida seeks to demonstrate the dependence of Western humanism on this structure of sacrifice: only through the sacrifice of the flesh of animals is human subjectivity established as human. The eating of meat is a structure just as fundamental to our culture as *logocentrism* or *phallogentrism* ever has been; Derrida coined the term *carnophallogocentrism* as a description of the most basic structure of the West. As Derrida points out, he highlights the significance of this kind of eating not to encourage vegetarianism, but to lay bare the violent structures of sacrifice that also constitute the basis for what otherwise would seem to be a most tranquil humanism.

All of the categories of Western thought are based on a totalizing notion of life. What has meaning is that which can be incorporated into the great organism of life, that which resists this appropriation must be devoured in a violent appropriative act. In Derrida, what lies behind the interest in the

53. *Après le sujet qui vient*, Confrontation, Paris 1989, p. 107.

figures of assimilation is the desire to highlight the inedible, the remainders, the waste products, of the speculative communion. It is in Heidegger's late philosophy that Derrida finds the idea of the limits of linguistic appropriation – language is incapable of expressing the way that the movement of being appears. According to Heidegger, metaphysical philosophies have tried to take *being* as the highest or most general form of *a being* (or entity), of something that *is* – as God or as a most basic form of substance. What they have not been able to think is what Heidegger calls the *ontological difference*: the difference between being and that which is because of that being: the inner-worldly beings (entities). Being is something other than the totality of what is – it exceeds every system, but cannot be presented as anything other than this inaccessible transcendence. Being erases itself in beings, in that which is – it never becomes visible or accessible to language, the grammatical structures of which necessarily reduce it to a *something* – a substance, a thing. Being can never be captured in the question *What is?* and can thus never be grasped in language. Heidegger sees its double movement in Heraclitus' concept of *physis*: *Physis kryptesthai philei* – nature loves to hide itself. Being makes itself known via beings, but at the same time withdraws – hides (*kryptesthai*) itself in the unsayable.⁵⁴

As we suggested earlier, Derrida's idea of the concealment of being is transformed into a theory of linguistic encryption. Something remains inaccessible to hermeneutic exegesis: a remainder, a dead hieroglyph, an inaccessible encryption. The terminology of Heideggerian ontology (*being / beings*) is no longer in use, but the structure is the same – the accessible meaning is produced against the background of something inaccessible. Derrida calls it *writing*, and he goes back further than the time of the Greek encryption of being: to Egyptian hieroglyphics and the cult of death. The hieroglyph precedes the meaning-saturated life of the voice – it cannot be transformed into life and meaning, offering up instead an insurmountable opposition to being incorporated. The text is a sepulcher, a crypt, an indissoluble cipher.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, nr. 123, published by W. Kranz, Berlin 1951.

⁵⁵ Derrida has often commented on hieroglyphic writing, most exhaustively in "Scribble," the preface to Warburton's *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes*, Paris 1978.



As long as we remain on a strictly philosophical level, it seems possible to maintain the distinction between a hermeneutics of eating and a deconstruction that respects the indigestible remainder of the text. It is conceivable that one would want to qualify the line of reasoning further, and say, as Hamacher does, that “there is no understanding without resistance from something foreign, something that all at once motivates its interest, attracts it, and repels it.” And, conversely, “there is no reading that does not also receive a contribution from the understanding.” According to this view, the understanding of hermeneutics would be inevitable, even if it presupposes a more fundamental unreadability.

But if we look more closely at what philosophers like Gadamer or Derrida do when they read a text, we see that it is actually not in their capacity as critics that they approach the text in question. They don’t see it as unique, as worth exploring for the sake of its own distinctiveness, but as an example of or a pretext for philosophical arguments. In Gadamer’s case, this is easy to understand. The sense and meaning he appropriates in the act of reading is the food, the nourishment that is his due qua educated fellowman and person of culture. In Derrida’s case, it is more problematic, for in his readings – of, for example, Celan’s poetry in *Schibboleth* – he seeks precisely to point to the role in the text of the date and the particular, that which can never be the object of an understanding appropriation.

But this *this-ness*, or singularity of the text, is of course not something characteristic of Celan’s text alone – even if Celan, perhaps more clearly than most other writers, marks it out.⁵⁶ For Derrida, that status applies to *all* texts. And regardless of the other merits of the study, one could level the same objection against it that Starobinski leveled against Derrida’s Rousseau chapter in *De la grammatologie*: the reading would probably achieved the same result if it had been based on Diderot’s or someone else’s writing. Derrida reads

⁵⁶ The very word “Schibboleth,” which at several points Celan uses repeatedly, is Hebrew in origin, and denotes a password with the power to mark a linguistic and social belonging. For Derrida, it will stand for every linguistic marking as an individual event. Naturally, that Celan’s style of writing is exceedingly distinctive, with each new poem being a separate demarcated event, along with the fact that he stressed this singularity by dating all of his poems, provides rich material for a deconstructive reading.

as a philosopher, the singular is *generally* characteristic of all the texts to the extent that they are texts.

In other words, one can say that if the hermeneuticist as philosopher points to the general edibility of the text, the deconstructionist points to its equally general inedibility.

But is it not possible to imagine a hermeneuticist or deconstructionist who reads as a critic?

Jean Starobinski would presumably be a good example of the former – he only reluctantly draws general theoretical conclusions from his work with texts.⁵⁷ Starobinski is certainly not a voracious exegete. He reads his authors with the utmost care and with respect for the particular. If we can in any way say that he *eats* his object – and his critical comportment bears a strong resemblance to Schleiermacher in his hermeneutics – he, undeniably, eats it with finesse.⁵⁸

It is difficult to give an example here of a deconstructive critic, since the overall deconstructive program of revealing the rhetoric in logic, or the writing in speech, always makes itself felt in the individual analysis.⁵⁹ Even the most prominent representative of this school is occasionally in danger of falling into the gap between literature and philosophy, and becoming – however one wants to see it – a dogmatic literary theorist or a dilettantish thinker.

But what seems clear is that deconstruction confronts the critic with questions that the critic needs to take a position on.

What should we make of the critic's relationship to food that, as Walter Benjamin said of the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal's texts, resists the demand for "real assimilability;" to writing that is "nutritious, but not edible"?⁶⁰

57 Jean Starobinski's most detailed discussion of questions about method can be found in the long essay, "Le sens de la critique" in *La relation critique*, Paris 1970.

58 See Manfred Frank's essay "Das 'einzelne Allgemeine' des Stils. Anmerkungen zur Hermeneutik Jean Starobinskis." in *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare*, Frankfurt am Main 1989. New ed.

59 It is therefore our view that deconstruction should be understood as philosophy, not as criticism in a more qualified sense. The difficulty the deconstructionist has in *meeting* a text – in establishing the "critical relationship" that Starobinski speaks of – has to do, however, not only with the philosopher's generalizing distance, but also with the dilemma encountered by deconstruction in indicating the identity of the texts or the worlds of texts at all. See Anders Olsson, *Den okända texten*, Stockholm 1987, p. 121f.

60 Citations from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, published by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main 1974–89, part VI, p. 145.

The realization that appropriation has this limitation can easily lead to melancholic resignation if one is filled, as is the romantic Schelling, with a longing, *Sehnsucht*, for an eternally elusive whole. But this realization can easily change into affirmative joy at the moment the limitation is seen as a sign of the richness of the interpreted text, and thus as an opportunity for the productivity of the act of reading. In fact, a distinguishing characteristic of many prominent critics is their stress on the necessity for and pleasure of the inexhaustible rereading. Perhaps this is, as in Nietzsche, a sign that reading has exceeded the border between assimilation and criticism understood as an art: "In order to, in this way, engage in reading as *art* would however above all require one thing which today has been completely forgotten – and therefore it will take even more time before my writings will be 'readable' – and for which it is almost required that one is a *cow* and in any case *not* a 'modern man': *rumination* ..." ⁶¹

But if it is true that the critic "is a reader who ruminates," ⁶² one is liberated only from that which is undeniably quite inconsolable in the image of the eternally chewing reader if one emphasizes that it is precisely a question of an image, nothing else. A text is the paradoxical other nourishment whose meaning can never be completely digested.

Which texts, then, best satisfy our critical disposition, which texts can be read and chewed again and again? *

Of all those who have sought to answer this question, surely none has done so more eloquently than the critic Roland Barthes in *Le plaisir du texte* from 1973. A fundamental idea of the work is that a text is never comparable to ordinary food or nourishment. To write is not to satisfy basic needs, but to want something *more*, to move from need to desire, from a kind of automation in response, to obsession. ⁶³ For Barthes, a writer is always a bit of a neurotic, one who wants to seduce his audience. Even Georges Bataille, who

⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, published by Karl Schlechta, Frankfurt am Main 1984, Part III, p. 770.

⁶² The claim is Friedrich Schlegel's in fragment nr. 27 in *Kritische Fragmente* from 1797. See *Kritische Schriften und Fragmente 1794–1797*, vol. 1, eds. Ernst Behler and Hans Eichner, Paderborn 1988, p. 240.

⁶³ Barthes is presented with a text that is "babbly" and immediately elicits ennui, which occasions several interesting reflections. *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris 1973, p. 11f.

writes *against* neurosis from an even more “insane” position, clearly manifests a certain coquetry.⁶⁴

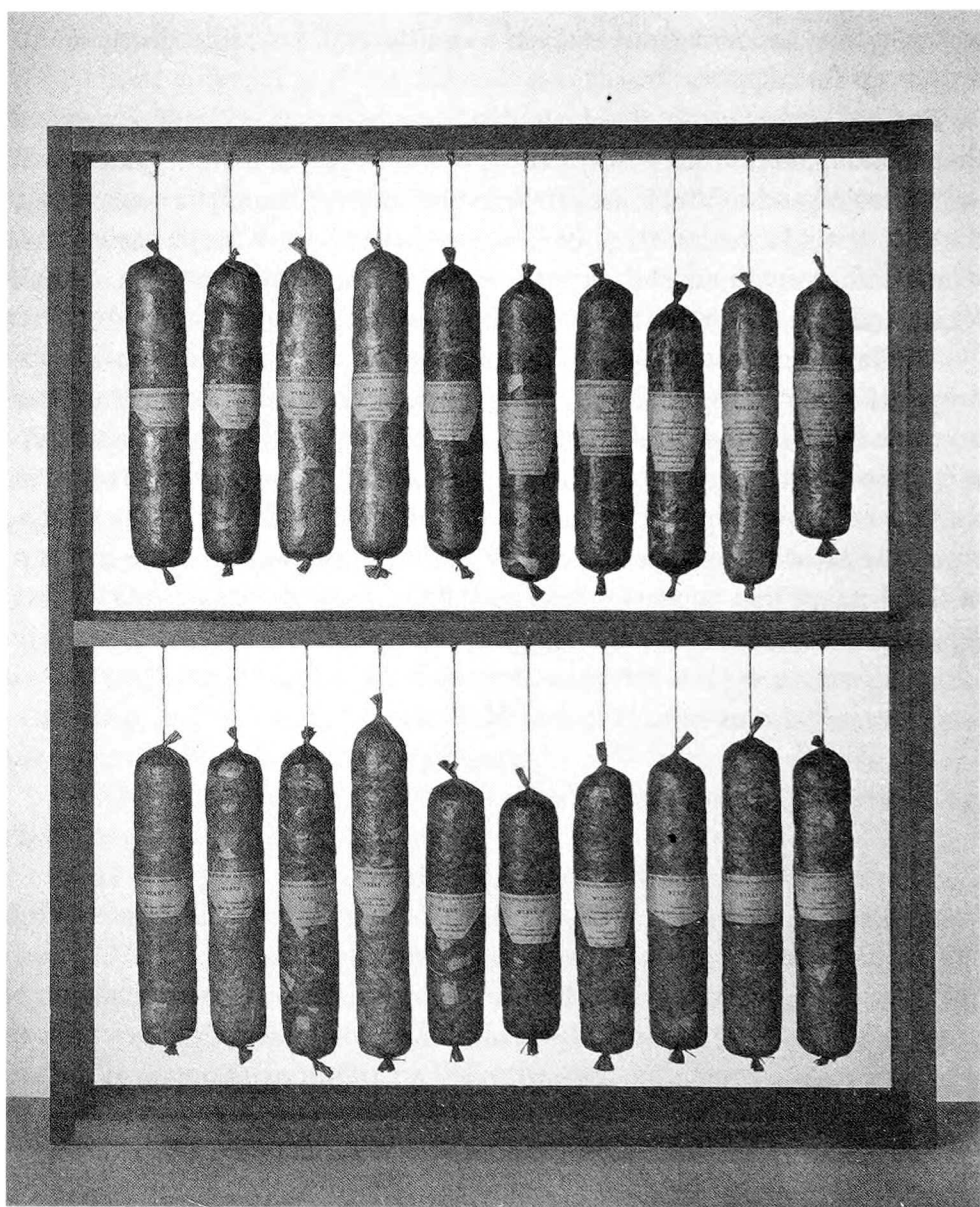
Barthes makes use of psychoanalytic concepts, but nothing remains of the orthodox faith in the reality principle and a concomitant devaluation of art as illusion and sublimation. The relevance of psychoanalytic concepts for Barthes’ thought is that they, in his use of them, place emphasis on that which is aberrant, mad, and eccentric in all writing worth the name. Art is a fetish, and “this fetish desires me,” writes Barthes.⁶⁵

We have thus once again arrived at the point that seems to provide appropriation via eating with its greatest resistance: the desire for the letter becomes fetish, mania, and ritual surplus. In Barthes, this desire has its direct opposite in melancholy, or more precisely in the ennui experienced in the face of everything that represents the “natural” cycle in culture: stereotypes, the casual repetition of the same. Ennui is an eruption of sovereignty, of the distance that appears when the sight of the community-establishing repast has become all too depressing.



⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 45.



Dieter Roth *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: Works in 20 Volumes*, 1974
Suhrkamp pocketbook edition, chopped with spices and lard, in sausage casings on wooden frame
100 × 85 × 14 cm
© Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Archiv Sohm

X. Antithesis

Roth / Giacometti

The desire for a different kind of eating, an appropriation that goes beyond the usual food, doesn't simply apply to reading, or to the text, but can also shape the perception of space – the relation of the artist to the visually given. The inner emptiness and lack can be overcome in various ways: by saturating the space, filling it to the point of bursting, or through starvation's strict negation – the desire to elevate absence to a sublime truth. Here, we will try to clarify the two strategies by means of two extreme examples: Dieter Roth and Alberto Giacometti.

In a short 1975 statement about Dieter Roth, Harald Szeemann declared: "There are two fundamental possibilities available to an artist: to negate, stripping away until nothing remains, or to accumulate, to embrace additively until one has reached the limit of fullness. The subversive, at times contrarian Dieter Roth – loving and caustic, chaotic and precise – has pursued both paths at once."¹ Both tendencies may indeed be visible in Roth's oeuvre, but it is no doubt the accumulative impulse that dominates. *Gartenskulptur* [Garden Sculpture], 1968–96, a collaboration with his son Bjorn Roth, is a case in point. Constructed out of radically heterogeneous materials – wood, metal, wires, plants, video monitors and recorders, toys, foodstuffs, jars of colored liquid, and so on – it constructs its own perplexing cosmos. Part jungle, part vehicle, it seems capable of swallowing anything coming its way.

¹ Szeemann, Harald: "All and Nothing," in *Artforum International*, October 1998, p. 100.

Here the additive tendency verges on bulimia, and Roth has invented a sculptural genre of his own. That many of his works are bound to decompose – yogurt and chocolate aren't meant to last for generations – makes the preservation of his productions a great challenge for any museum. Only with some hesitancy did he introduce preservatives and other devices for slowing down the process of degeneration, and then probably only because the process of corrosion and decomposition becomes even more visible in slow motion.

Chocolate, sour milk, cheese, and slices of sausage were some of his preferred materials. A legendary work, *Staple Cheese (A Race)*, 1970, the first of Roth's to appear in the United States, is gone forever; thrown into the garbage, rumor has it, by Jim Butler (husband of Eugenia Buffer, in whose gallery the work was originally shown) because of its unbearable smell. Based in Reykjavik for most of his adult life, Roth was removed from the art world, yet also quite strategically placed between Europe and the U.S. Indeed, his thirty-seven suitcases filled with different kinds of cheeses displayed in an L.A. gallery attracted not only an enormous number of flies and insects, but also a lot of attention from the press, even from leading international daily, the *International Herald Tribune*. Sanitation inspectors were brought in and finally closed down the show. But this publicity did not lead to a breakthrough in the U.S., inspiring instead only a strange poem by Patti McCarthy celebrating the rotting cheese.

Was Dieter Roth a transdisciplinary “total” artist comparable to Andy Warhol or Joseph Beuys? A concrete poet branching out into the nonlinguistic world of sausages and garbage? Or just a high-energy scatologist with the unlimited will to produce constantly new “shit”? In one of many attempts to describe his own activities, he concluded: “I would call myself an inventor of machines that are meant to entertain (or inspire) feelings (or thoughts) that help to digest this Central European civilization wading in junk.”² The digestive metaphors recur throughout his career. In 1966 he published a collection of poems under what he later called the “ironic = anxious neutralizing” title *Scheisse – Neue Gedichte von Diter Rot* [Shit – New Poems by Diter Rot],

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all Roth citations are from *Roth Zeit: Eine Dieter Roth Retrospektive*, Baden 2003.

soon to be followed by other collections of “more shit,” “damn shit,” “complete shit,” and so on. In the first volume, the poem “My Eye Is a Mouth” formulates the basic parameters of a lifelong attempt to break out of traditional aesthetics as something linked to vision, and to question the hegemony of the eye and the ocular metaphors that dominate all discourse on art. Here he establishes the notion of an all-encompassing metabolism, and also draws scatological conclusions:

my eye is a mouth
my eyelids are the mouth's lips
my eyelashes are the mouth's teeth
my eyeball is the mouth's tongue
my iris is the top of the tongue
my pupil is the mouth's kiss
my eye socket is the mouth's palate
my optic nerve is the mouth's pharynx
my brain is the mouth's stomach
my images are the mouth's digestion
my life is the mouth's excrement³

Roth often described himself as a poet involved in a kind of guest performance in the art world (but in fact he was never taken very seriously in the literary world). His experiments with the book as an object took concrete poetry one step further into the materially concrete. Compared with books by American contemporaries such as George Brecht or Ed Ruscha, Roth's books are more “stuffy,” he admitted. His specialty: “Kitsch. Heavy Kitsch. Kind of a Nietzschean Pudding.” But there are also other dishes involved, the silliest – but also most amusing – being “Literaturwurst” [Literary Sausage]. The whole project started in 1961, seemingly as a way to handle his literary envy. The first books, by Günter Grass and Martin Walser, were successful ones that he for various reasons found particularly annoying. The very first, Grass's *Hundejahre* [Dog Years], was made as a gift for his friend Daniel Spoerri: It was shredded,

3 Scheisse. *Neue Gedichte von Diter Rot*, Providence 1966, p 16.

mixed with fat and herbs according to a traditional recipe, and turned into a sausage carrying the author's name and the title on a small label. Many more literary sausages were to come, among them a series containing the complete works of Hegel.



If Roth is an artist who has transformed the consuming melancholy into a force of production, a universe coded with such a plenitude of rich food that in its excess can be allowed to rot, then Alberto Giacometti is the opposite: a hunger artist, one who creates by taking away rather than by adding, by hollowing out instead of filling up. To the extent that the term "hunger artist" can be applied to Giacometti, it's not simply because he had an intense relationship to Kafka's works, and thought that they embodied a problematic relationship to the law, as well as a transcendence beyond the death of God.⁴ The entirety of Giacometti's gaze and method of working appear to have been influenced by a desire to establish absence, the negative. "In order to do something, one has to undo it. In this way, everything is lost once again." Or: "What I do comes from the negative."⁵

Giacometti comes from the same part of Switzerland as the melancholic painter Segantini, the inaccessible mountainous area at Val Bregaglia between Engadin and the Italian border. Having been raised in this landscape, as barren as it is magnificent, and where Calvinism has had a strong foothold through the centuries, has clearly left indelible traces on the artist's inner life. But equally important – if we are to believe Yves Bonnefoy's overpoweringly rich "oeuvre biography" – is his very close relationship to Annetta, his very strict and forceful mother. Bonnefoy's thesis is that throughout his life, Giacometti sought to recreate the impossible, his relationship with a perfect, and just as inexorably absent, mother figure. The absence must at all costs find expression, receive form. The last words Giacometti utters on his deathbed are: "I shall be reunited with my mother."⁶

⁴ See Yves Bonnefoy, Alberto Giacometti, *Biographie d'une œuvre*, Paris 1991, p. 284f.

⁵ Ibid. p. 386.

⁶ Ibid. p. 49.

As an artist, Giacometti has a fidelity to origins that is just as strong as his insight into the inevitability of loss. One of his most intense childhood experiences is his encounter with a luminous, gigantic stone, in which there is a cave where he can hide. He digs himself inaccessible spaces in the snow, where he can escape from the world by himself. He dreams intoxicated dreams about the endless expanses of Siberia, covered in gray snow. He is filled with an enormous absence, which he later will recreate.⁷

When he arrives in Paris, he quickly finds a studio and residence in a little “hole in the wall,” a shabby and extremely meager two-room apartment on Rue Hippolyte-Maindron in Montparnasse, where, to the dismay of many of his friends, he would live until his death. Giacometti was never concerned with his external circumstances. It is as if he were vaccinated against deprivation.

We can clearly see his hunger art in its mature, and for us well-known form in such works such as *L'Objet invisible* from 1934 or *Mains tenant le vide* from 1934–1935, which mark a turning point in Giacometti's artistic practice.⁸ The Madonna, holding emptiness in her hands, points to the absence that is present in almost all of his sculptures and paintings. In Giacometti's eye, all motion, all gesturing, all living material is frozen and solidifies. The bodies are peeled down to skeletons, but only – as dead or dying bodies – in order to be dematerialized and in a subsequent step restored to a new, immense dignity. The artist builds up life that is impoverished, fragile, or emaciated only to reinforce the sense of the incomprehensible energy that keeps it in motion. The sculptures are flames of death and life in one.

Of what does this negative strategy speak?

Giacometti is seeking an absolute absence in that which is most concretely individual – man or animal – but it can never be reached. The work is an ever-progressing, asymptotic approximation: an inevitable failure, as Giacometti often testified: “When I see an exhibition of my own works, I am the first to think they are better than everything that others are doing”; but, he adds, “when I see that they don't have the slightest connection to what I hope I am capable of, I nonetheless conclude that they are in fact worthless.”⁹

7 Information on Giacometti's childhood, *ibid.*

8 *Ibid.* pp. 226–241.

9 *Ibid.* p. 339.

But if that is the case, then all that art can provide us with is that which is useless. Possessed of a value beyond all depiction, the artist can only, in endless variations, intimate the distance to the full presence. But there is just as little bitterness in Giacometti's works as there is in Kafka's, he is everything he recreates, he has directed his emptiness out into the world and given it paradoxical form. It remains not in the interior, negative, and melancholic, but is sublimely exalted, out and up to the exterior.

The other food has – miraculously – found a location in space.

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XI. To Suckle a Church Spire

What more is there to say? What more is there to take in, or to pass on to the world?

Everything or nothing, bulimia or anorexia, would appear to be the answer of the melancholiac – either a manic abundance or a beseeching at the outer edge of language. At the same time, we've seen how melancholy tends to sublate itself as soon as it becomes language. The inner suffering is projected out onto the world and finds a foothold in the sign, which no longer belongs to the I. Since melancholy, in all its wordlessness, is a genuine creation of symbols, one can say that it is self-sublating as a phenomenon. The melancholiac invents the means by which he can continue on in his plight. And not only that: the opposing, conservative tendency possessed by the melancholiac makes him not simply transcend his suffering by means of his newly formed language, but also, in a second phase, it enables him to make use of this via repetitions and infinite variations in order to preserve his mysterious object. This preservation by means of neologisms is a part of the melancholiac's *style*.

One can speak of various strategies for expressing melancholy. First, we have the traditional symbolization of dejection, which makes use of handed-down formulas and signs. We encountered this in Dürer, Nerval, and Ekelöf. This first strategy often becomes a *hyperbolic strengthening* of the symbolization, where the melancholy is transferred from the individual to a broader drama on the world stage. As in Roth, it is a plethora of accumulated objects that overflows and metamorphoses into apocalyptic rot. But melancholy can

also turn into manic triumph or obsession, where the I, more obviously than in the previous solutions, transcends itself in an anonymous, self-creating linguistic process that resembles a litany, or a mechanical representation. We saw this in Beckett and Thomas Bernhard. A fourth strategy, the most radical, is to quite simply starve the melancholy out, withhold from it its nourishment, as in Kafka, Giacometti, or the later Ekelöf. In this case, one can scarcely speak of melancholy at all. The hunger artist is rather at the boundary of melancholy.¹

How should this boundary be described? Can it be grasped simply in terms of starvation, of not eating?

Certainly not.

Let us examine two extreme opposites, both seemingly light-years from melancholy: the sanguine Italo Calvino, and the prophetic Antonin Artaud.

Calvino's story, "Sotto il sole giaguaro," concludes as follows:

Under the thatched arbor of a restaurant in a riverbank, where Olivia had waited for me, our teeth began to move slowly, with equal rhythm, and our eyes stared into each other's with the intensity of serpents' – serpents concentrated in the ecstasy of swallowing each other in turn, as we were aware, in our turn, of being swallowed by the serpent that digests us all, assimilated ceaselessly in the process of ingestion and digestion, in the universal cannibalism that leaves its imprint on every amorous relationship and erases the lines between our bodies and sopa de frijoles, huachinango a la vera cruzana, and enchiladas.²

Only someone possessed of sanguine humor can compare love-making to a cannibalistic repast in such an unproblematic way, where the two consume each other, and not only that: they devour each other's devouring of the Mexican dishes indicated in the final lines The limits of melancholy are obviously a

¹ In an essay in the book, *Ground Work* (1990), the American author Paul Auster has addressed hunger art as a modernist strategy, "an art that is the direct expression of the effort to express oneself." He sees it as an "existential" art, pointing directly into doomed modern prose, from Hamsun's *Hunger* to Kafka and Beckett.

² Italo Calvino, from *Under the Jaguar Sun*, transl. William Weaver, San Diego 1988, p. 29.

shared cannibalism, a sacrifice shared in togetherness or love. This cannibalism is not a malignant, archaic remains living on in the human psyche: it is the ground without which no love affair is complete. To love is to eat – but for fun: a difference between metaphoric and real eating that the melancholiac doesn't feel.³

Artaud's solution, close to the Mexican culture of sacrifice in the same way that Calvino's fantasy is, would appear to be the opposite: the revolt against eating and against the body driven to an extreme. The "I" sacrifices itself and its word for the sake of a different, immaculate order. Artaud defends himself with instinctual power against the representation of the symbolic food – "spiritual nourishment" – of the word qua body, and man as his own sustenance. The word is the cadaver of psychic life, a barbaric remnant from a past epoch, the food, and the word qua food, which, in Artaud, constantly tempts one towards a criminal, incestuous act, the possibility of returning to oneself and the world in a "natural" circulation.

Il y a dans les formes du Verbe humain je ne sais quelle opération de rapace, quelle autodévoration de rapace où le poète, se bornant à l'objet, se voit mangé par cet objet. [...] Un crime pèse sur le Verbe fait chair, mais le crime est de l'avoir admis. [...] L'inverti est celui qui mange son moi et veut que son soi le nourrisse, cherche dans son soi sa mère et veut la posséder pour lui. Le crime primitif de l'inceste est l'ennemi de la poète et le tueur de son immaculée poésie. [...] Je ne veux pas manger mon poème, mais je veux donner mon cœur à mon poème. Mon cœur est ce qui n'est pas moi. [...] Je suis ce poète oublié, qui s'est vu tomber de la matière un jour, et la matière ne me mangera pas, moi.⁴

3 This boundary is crossed in a shocking way in Heinrich von Kleist's drama *Penthesilea*, where the Amazon throws herself over the beloved Achilles:
"Penthesilea! meine Braut! was thust du? / Ist dies das Rosenfest, das du versprachst? / Doch sie – die Löwinn hätte ihn gehört, / Die hungrige, die wild nach Raub umher, / Auf öden Schneegefilde heulend treibt; / Sie schlägt, die Rüstung ihm vom Leibe reissend, / Den Zahn schlägt sie in seine weiße Brust, / Sie und die Hunde, die wetteifernden, / Oxus und Sphynx den Zahn in seine rechte, / In seine linke sie; als ich erschien, / Troff Blut von Mund und Händen ihr herab." Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. 2, Frankfurt am Main 1987, p. 241 (ll. 2664–2674).

4 Antonin Artaud, from *Oeuvres complètes*. Tome IX. Paris: Gallimard 1971, p. 144f.

Artaud is searching for a Virgin Law beyond Calvino's universal cannibalism, or beyond carnocentrism, which Derrida viewed as typical for Western thought.⁵ To place oneself beyond humanity's "desire for the cadaver" in this way is of course something attended by great risk⁶ – above all, the risk of going insane, a risk we know Artaud himself was willing to take.

But there are also other ways of creating something from contradiction, from a lack or abundance, without yielding to melancholy. There is a hunger for a food that is never led back to the same, the known, or to a natural circulation. That hunger for something more can be Kafka's hunger for a colossal food, or Ekelöf's hunger for hunger in *Diwān*, for an infinite non-being beyond man's senses and concepts. Edith Södergran is such a hunger artist, one who managed to turn the ennui of depression into "the brief moments when the desert blooms." She climbs out of her previous melancholy with a power that crushes suns, and her hunger drives her out beyond the boundaries of being, towards the vision of a land that is not.⁷

This more can be prophetic, and can be intimately connected to writing as such, given that the word in itself bears with it a coming time, a time that has yet to be realized.

We encounter a paradoxical form of this more when it manages to encompass reality in its most tangible form, and the appetite turns out towards things instead of, satiated by normal food, being stilled before them. The world becomes open to heightened senses as if it had been liberated from its coded covering. Thought and the senses turn outward and become productive, something which Novalis was perhaps the first to give a philosophical meaning to.⁸ The world exists for my sake, it is my mission.

In the case of the obsessed Rimbaud, this inversion of the appetite is so strong that the senses get confused in an almost shocking encounter with objects. These are not simply tasted as impressions that can be compared,

⁵ It is no accident that Derrida returned on a number of occasions to Artaud's encounter with the constraints placed on Western theater by the word. See the essays "La parole soufflée" and "Le théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation" in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris 1967.

⁶ Artaud's position is aggressively anti-Freudian, and he wants to see the libido itself as "the definition of this desire for the cadaver." Ibid, p. 229.

⁷ Södergran's hunger art is rooted both in an actual starvation when she lived in Karelia, and in her tuberculosis. Cf. Gunnar Tidsström, *Edith Södergran*, Stockholm 1949.

but rather they are wolfed down in their entirety. Poisonous stems are bitten off, church towers are suckled. Normal food is uninteresting. The world is my appetite, a single imperative: there to be eaten!

This can be seen in the poem “Hunger” (Faim), which, as it happens, was also of interest to Ekelöf, who translated it for his anthology *Hundra år modern fransk dikt* [One Hundred Years of Modern French Poetry]:

Fêtes de la faim

Si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guère
Que pour la terre et les pierres.
Je déjeune toujours d'air,
De roc, de charbons, de fer.

Mes faims, tournez. Paisez, faims,
Le pré des sons.
Attirez le gai venin
Des liserons.

Mangez les cailloux qu'on brise,
Les vieilles pierres d'églises ;
Les galets des vieux déluges,
Pains semés dans les vallées grises.⁹

⁸ The central fragment is the rich fragment nr. 226, one of the “Vorarbeiten” from 1798, where Novalis writes: “Actually, musicians also hear actively – they hear outwardly. To be sure, this inverted use of the senses is a secret for most, every artist should be aware of this. Almost every human being is in some sense already an artist – in point of fact they see outwards and not inwards. The primary difference is that the artist has given life to the seed of a self-creating life in its organs...” Cf. Fragment 125: “The world has an original ability to be brought to life by me – quite simply, it is animated a priori by me – it is One with me. I have an original tendency and ability to animate the world....”

⁹ Rimbaud, in *Poésies complètes*, Paris 1998.



This has been the primary idea of this essay, that there is a deep connection between melancholy and hunger for another food, a feverish, insatiable hunger, like that of a frenetic weasel sucking eggs.

To a certain degree, religion can be viewed as such a symbolic nourishment, but traditionally religion has had a disparaging view of melancholy. If religion tries to satisfy an elementary need for food with its spiritual nourishment, and thereby can have the function of creating communities, then art, at least in its modern form, has thus progressed from need to desire, and to obsession. In its struggle to create a new and divergent language within language, art has defended itself against the demand to quench the thirst for meaning or to be consoling. It is a nourishment that, paradoxically, is inedible and can, as in Kafka, be presented as the very ground of the common language, its poisonous kernel. We surmise that it is precisely this other food, this hard kernel, that drives artistic language further: always once again an object for appropriation, but never fully broken down in the metabolism of culture.

It is like the pomegranate seed which the god Hades, by means of a ruse, got Kore to swallow before she was released from the realm of the underworld, so that the earth once again could begin to germinate. The seed, which is indigestible, is a reminder of the ancient connection between fertility and the powers of darkness.



Note on the Translation

Like all complicated theoretical works, Anders Ölsson and Daniel Birnbaum's essay presents a number of translation challenges. One worth making special note of is the question of how to translate the Swedish term *melankoli*, and the related term, *melankoliker*. English has two nouns that derive from the Greek μελαγχολία (literally, "black bile"): *melancholy*, and *melancholia*. Swedish has just one word for this: *melankoli*. Likewise, the person suffering from *melankoli* can, in English, be referred to either as a *melancholic* or a *melancholiac*, whereas in Swedish he is always a *melankoliker*. British English has generally preferred *melancholy* and, for the individual, *melancholic*, whereas American usage tends to draw a distinction between a condition that primarily affects the soul, which is referred to as *melancholy*, and an affliction that has a more generally medical nature, which is referred to as *melancholia*. (And the person suffering from the former would be a *melancholic*, the person suffering from the latter, a *melancholiac*.) In the interests of consistency in style, the authors and I decided to "split the difference" in usage between, so to speak, the body and the soul: *melankoli* is consistently translated with *melancholy*, and *melankoliker* is translated with *melancholiac*. "Melancholy" will thus remind us of the ailments of the soul (which of course also affect the body), while "melancholiac" will remind us of the ancient doctrine of the body's four humors (which of course also involves the soul). Because usage in English has been inconsistent, the terms used in quoted material will often vary, and references back to quoted material will sometimes use the original authors' terms (for example, "clinical melancholia"). It is hoped that occasional deviation from our translation choice will be more enriching than confusing.

The translator would like to thank the authors for numerous extremely helpful suggestions, as well as a number of fascinating discussions about the book itself.

Brian Manning Delaney, Stockholm 2008

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Daniel Birnbaum & Anders Olsson
As a Weasel Sucks Eggs
An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism

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“As is so often the case, it is the poets, and to a certain extent the philosophers, who lead us deeper into the labyrinth of hunger. They are distanced from the requirements to which the community-engendering meal is connected, either because they are outside the community, or because they have an appetite or hunger that consistently exceeds the boundaries of culture’s sacrosanct regulatory scheme. As a matter of custom, they have adopted a melancholic position, unable to forget the Golden Age of Saturn, an era associated with images of an infinitely rich, flowing abundance – a memory, so easily projected onto the future as a utopia, before which the world in its present form easily pales into the background.”

Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson’s essay *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs* contains readings of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Thomas Bernhard, Sigmund Freud, GWF Hegel, and Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf.

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